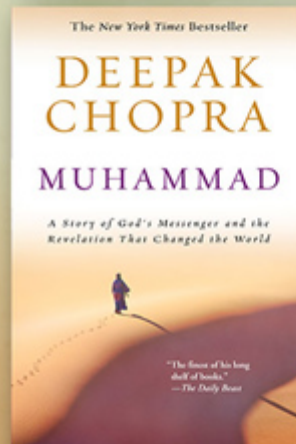
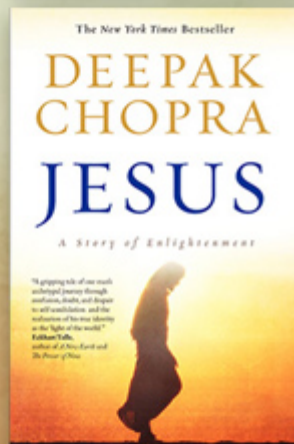
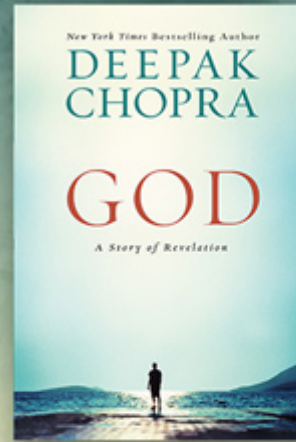
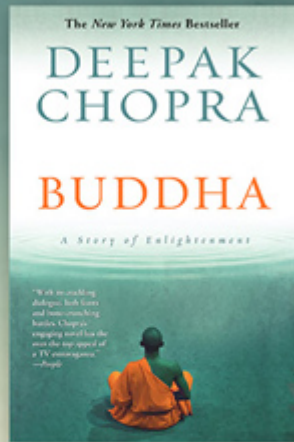


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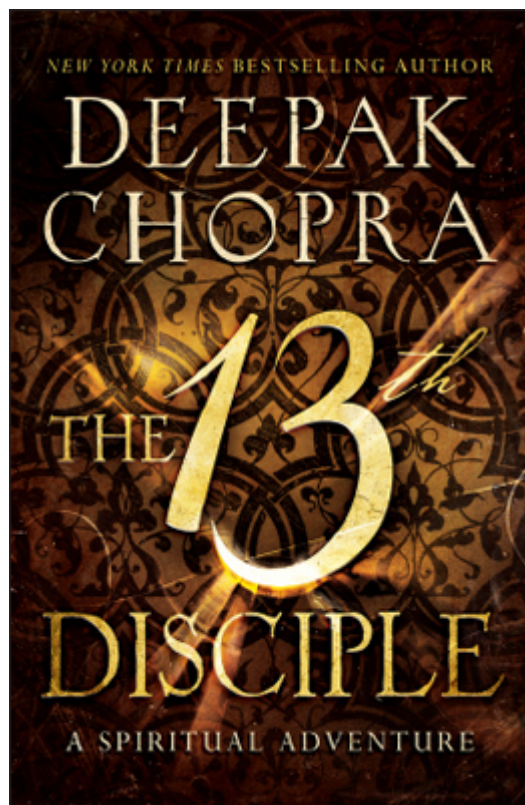
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BUDDHA

A Story of Enlightenment

Deepak Chopra

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PART ONE

SIDDHARTHA THE PRINCE

1

The Kingdom of Sakya, 563 BCE

One crisp spring day King Suddhodana turned in his saddle to survey the battlefield. He needed a weakness to exploit, and he was confident the enemy had left one for him. They always did. His senses were closed to everything else. Screams of the wounded and dying were heightened by the hoarse commands of his officers bellowing orders and calling on the gods for help. Torn by hooves and elephants' feet, cut by iron-rimmed chariot wheels, the land oozed blood as if the earth itself were mortally wounded.

“More soldiers! I want more soldiers now!”

Suddhodana didn't wait for anyone to obey. “If any man within the sound of my voice runs away, I will kill him personally!”

Charioteers and infantry moved toward the king, battered figures so filthy with fighting they could have been demiurges fashioned from the mud of the field.

Suddhodana was a warrior king, and the first thing to know about him is this: he mistook himself for a god. Along with his army, the king would kneel in the temple and pray before he went to war, but he put no trust in divine help. Leaving the gates of the capital behind, Suddhodana turned his head for one last look at home. But as the miles lengthened from Kapilavastu, his mood changed. By the time he came to the battlefield, its roiling activity and the smells that assaulted his nostrils—straw and blood, soldiers' sweat and dying horses—carried Suddhodana into another world. It smothered him completely in the belief that he could never lose.

The present campaign wasn't of his doing. Ravi Santhanam, a northern warlord along the Nepalese border, had taken one of Suddhodana's trade caravans in a surprise attack. Suddhodana's retaliation came almost immediately. Even though the warlord's men had the advantage of the high ground and home terrain, Suddhodana's forces steadily chewed into their holdings. Horses and elephants trampled over the fallen, dead or still alive but too weak to escape. Suddhodana guided his mount next to the belly of a rearing bull elephant, narrowly avoiding the massive feet as they plunged downward. Half a dozen arrows had pierced it, driving the beast into a frenzy.

"I want a new line of chariots, close file!" He had seen where the enemy front was exhausted and ready to buckle. A dozen more chariots pulled up in advance of the infantry. Their metal-bound wheels clattered across the hard ground. The charioteers had archers standing behind them who unleashed arrows into the warlord's army.

"Make a moving wall," Suddhodana shouted. "I want to crush their line."

His charioteers were experienced veterans; they were hard-faced, merciless men. Suddhodana rode slowly before them, ignoring the strife only a short distance away. He spoke quietly. "The gods command that there can be only one king. But I swear that I am no better than a common soldier today, and you are as good as kings. Each man here is part of me. So what's left for the king to say? Only two words, but they are the two that your hearts want to hear. *Victory*. And *home!*" Then his command cracked like a whip.

"All together—move!"

Both armies rushed screaming into the breach like opposing oceans. Violence brought contentment to Suddhodana. His sword whirled as he split a man's head with a single blow. His wall was advancing, and if the gods willed it, as they had to will it, the enemy forces would open, one corpse at a time, until Suddhodana's infantry moved in, a tight

wedge gliding forward on enemy blood. The king would have scoffed at anyone who denied that he was at the very center of the world.

AT THAT HOUR Suddhodana's queen was being carried in a litter through the depths of the forest. She was ten months pregnant, a sign, the astrologers said, that the baby would be extraordinary. But in Queen Maya's mind nothing was extraordinary except the anxiety that surrounded her. She had decided, much too impetuously, to travel back to her mother's home to have her baby.

Suddhodana hadn't wanted to let her go. It was the custom for new mothers to go home to deliver, but he and Maya were inseparable. He was tempted to refuse, until in her guileless way Maya asked his permission in front of the assembled court. The king couldn't refuse his queen publicly, despite the dangers involved.

"Who will accompany you?" he asked with an edge of harshness, hoping to frighten her away from this foolhardy plan.

"My women."

"Women?"

He raised his hand in grudging assent. "You'll have some men, whoever can be spared." Maya smiled and withdrew. Suddhodana didn't want to argue, because in truth his wife mystified him. Making her afraid of danger was futile. The physical world was like a thin membrane she glided over, as a midge glides over the surface of a pond without breaking the water's skin. Therefore, the world could touch Maya, move her, hurt her, but never change her.

The queen departed from Kapilavastu a day before the army. Kumbira, the eldest court lady, rode at the head of the procession as it moved through the forest. It was a meager company, consisting of six soldiers too old to serve in the war astride six nags too weak to charge the enemy. After them

came four litter bearers, who had taken off their shoes to negotiate the stony path, shouldering the tasseled and beaded palanquin bearing the young queen. Maya made no sound hidden behind the swaying silk drapes, except for a stifled moan whenever a bearer stumbled and the litter took a sharp jolt. Three young ladies-in-waiting, who grumbled in low voices about having to walk, brought up the rear.

Gray-haired Kumbira kept her gaze moving, aware of the dangers that lurked on both sides. This road, which was just a narrow cut in the granite slope, had begun as a smuggler's trail when poached deer hides, spices, and other contraband were trafficked to Nepal; it was still favored by bandits. Tigers were known to snatch their prey from terrified bands of travelers in this area, even in the brightest hour of the day. To ward them off, the bearers wore masks facing backward on their heads, believing that a tiger will only leap from the rear, never directly at a person who is looking at it.

Kumbira rode up the trail until she was abreast of Balgangadhar, the head guard. The warrior regarded her stoically, wincing a little when the queen cried out again.

"She can't hold out much longer," Kumbira said.

"And I can't make the road any shorter," Balgangadhar grumbled.

"What you can do is hurry," she snapped. Kumbira knew he was ashamed at not being with the king in battle, but Suddhodana wanted one elite guard to honor his wife.

With the slightest bow from the shoulders that etiquette permitted, the guard said, "I'll scout up ahead for camp. The locals say there's a woodcutter's clearing with some huts in it."

"No, we move together," Kumbira protested.

"There are other men here to protect you while I'm gone."

"Really?" Kumbira cast a critical eye over her shoulder at the ragged band. "And who will protect them, do you suppose?"

THEY WILL TELL YOU that Maya Devi—the goddess Maya, as she became known—arrived by moonlight in Lumbini Grove, one of the most sacred sites in the kingdom. They will tell you that she did not give birth in the forest by accident. Destiny guided her there. She expressly wanted to visit the sacred grove because a huge tree stood there like a pillar to the mother goddess. Maya’s premonition had told her that this birth would be sacred.

In reality she was a frightened, fragile young woman who barely escaped being lost in the wilderness. And the sacred tree? Maya clung to the trunk of a large sal tree because it was the closest and most common tree in the clearing. Balgangadhar had found a sheltered place beside the trail, and the royal palanquin arrived there only moments before Maya went into the final stages of labor. The court ladies formed a close circle around her. She held on tight, and deep in the night she was delivered of the son her husband the king so desperately wanted.

Kumbira died long before the legends grew, so she is not pictured in them, barking commands to the scurrying women, shooing away the men, nearly scalding herself to bring a kettle of water on the run from the bonfire. It was she who first held the baby. Tenderly she scrubbed the blood from his tiny body, making the squalling newborn ready to show to Maya. The queen lay quietly on the ground, almost listless. The first nursing, an important ritual in the native custom, would come in the morning. Despite the baby’s apparent good health, Kumbira was worried, made anxious by every nocturnal sound but most of all by Maya’s labor, which had been too long and painful.

“Now my husband can die happy,” Maya whispered in a tired, weak voice. “And I will not be cursed when I am gone.” Kumbira started. How could Maya think about death at that moment? Kumbira’s eyes searched the darkness surrounding their stranded camp. The younger court ladies were full of

praise for the brave new mother, relieved that the ordeal had come to an end, buoyant at the prospect of returning home to their soft beds and paramours. Their happiness increased when the full moon, an auspicious omen, rose over the treetops.

“Here, Your Highness,” said Utpatti, one of the handmaidens, leaning close. “There is something you must do.”

Before anyone could stop her, Utpatti opened Maya’s robe and exposed her breasts. Embarrassed and confused, Maya quickly pulled her robe together again with one hand.

“What are you doing?” she demanded.

Utpatti drew back. “It will help with the milk, Your Highness,” she whispered, looking unsure of herself. She gave sidelong glances at the other women. “Having moonlight on your breasts. Country women all know that.”

“Are you from the country?” Maya asked.

The others tittered. Making a show of not being bothered by them, Utpatti said, “Once.”

Maya leaned back again and exposed her full breasts to the moon. They were heavy with milk already.

“I feel something,” she murmured. Her mood had changed; a note of ecstasy was in her voice, clearing away the pain. If she wasn’t a goddess herself, she exulted in being touched by a goddess, the moon. She took her infant and held him up.

“See how quiet he is now? He feels it too.” At that moment Maya believed in her heart that her wishes had been fulfilled. There is a name in Sanskrit that expresses this idea. She lifted the baby higher.

“Siddhartha,” she said. *He who has attained all desires.* Recognizing the solemnity of the moment, the court ladies bowed their heads, even the ever-wary Kumbira.

2

The gray rain blanketed Suddhodana and his men as the towers of home loomed over them. The sentry shouted from his post, and the great wooden gates of the capital opened. “Look sharp!” sergeants shouted down the line. Few citizens had turned out to greet them. Suddhodana knew that the huddled clumps of women lining the street were there to search the army with anxious faces, praying that their husbands and sons were still among the living.

That morning the queen had awakened at dawn in case her husband returned early, but then the rains set in, slowing everything. The trip down from the mountains had passed in a kind of blurred ecstasy, which grew stronger even as Maya’s body began to fail. There was much whispering at court because she had refused the services of a wet nurse. “It cannot be that loving my child will kill me,” she said.

Her mind returned to a dream that had visited her ten months ago. It began with Maya waking up in her private bedchamber. She shaded her eyes against a light that had appeared in the room. Out of the light emerged three angelic beings in the form of smiling young maidens. Sitting up, Maya immediately recognized her visitors for what they were—*devas*, or celestial beings.

The three *devas* gestured for her to join them. In wonder that they had chosen her, Maya climbed from her warm bed to follow. With a glance over their shoulders, they walked through the walls of her bedroom as though through smoke. Maya never felt the wall as she too passed through it. On the other side she was pulled faster, until the palace grounds and

the world beyond blurred in passing. A brighter light loomed ahead, and in a moment Maya saw that it was the sun reflected off snow. Daylight dazzled across the crystalline surface of a high mountain lake circled by sentinel peaks.

The Himalayas (for she knew with certainty that the devas had brought her there) had been distant, imposing presences all her life. Maya never imagined being among them, and now the three maidens led her to a pebble shore on the opposite side of the lake. Its surface was calm and mirror-bright.

The devas began disrobing her. Maya wasn't disconcerted; she grew relaxed. Almost as quickly as they took her clothes away, they fit her with the finest garments she had ever seen. With silent smiles they reached out to touch Maya's belly. The contact was warm and exciting. She stepped into the water of the lake, deeper and deeper. Then she awoke, finding herself sitting up in bed as if she'd never left it. Except that her bedchamber was filled by a creature whose eye captured her gaze. Expanding from the eye was a whiteness that took the shape, as Maya's mind cleared from sleep, of an enormous elephant as pale as snow. The creature looked at her with warm, confident intelligence. Then it lifted its trunk in a kind of salute. Unexpectedly, a burning hunger filled Maya. Then she woke again, sitting up in bed but alone. The unaccustomed desire was still within her and wouldn't be denied.

Quickly, almost shaking, she quit her bed, throwing on her robe, and ran to her husband's bedchamber. In the dim candlelight, Suddhodana lay twisted in the sheets. After their years of barren hopes for a son, he often slept alone now. Another king might have taken a lover who could provide him with a son. Another king might have simply had his wife murdered or locked away as a madwoman to dissolve the marriage contract. But Suddhodana hadn't done those things. He had remained as fierce and loyal in love as in war.

Tonight will be different, Maya told herself. *I have been blessed*. Cautiously, not wanting to awake Suddhodana too suddenly, she lay beside him on the bed. Gently she stroked his face, drawing him up from sleep. His hands turned to fists

at first, then his eyes opened and looked into hers. He started to speak, but she laid a finger over his lips.

She was not wild with desire, not its prisoner or slave. With her husband's legs entwined with hers, she didn't want pleasure as much as union. She encouraged him with words she never imagined saying. "Don't make love to me like a king. Make love like a god."

The effect was dramatic. Urgently, he reached for her, and she saw the wonder in his eyes. For so long their coupling had been perfunctory, neither of them believing that anything would come of it. But tonight he felt some of the strong belief that had awakened within her.

When she was ready, she rolled her hips and took him inside her. Her breath caught in her throat. The strange need within her reached a crescendo. For a few moments she entered that darkness of bliss that imitates immortality. Gradually she returned from it with a sigh, to find that the king was holding her in a tight embrace. He pulled her to him as if trying to meld his flesh completely with hers. They kissed and caressed; only her exhaustion in delight kept Maya from speaking what she knew with certainty: they had created a child.

The dream had sustained her in the terrifying trip through the forest and the pain of her labor. Now it was returning in more ghostly form every day. Her head sank into the pillow. *It was still a lovely dream*, she thought, and an escape from her great weariness. She even thought it would be better to live in her dream forever, if only she could.

IN THE ROYAL NURSERY Suddhodana gazed down at his son with awe and love. The baby had been presented to him in crimson silk swaddling clothes. He was certain the infant recognized him; it even grew in his mind that Siddhartha had kept his eyes shut until that moment, a fantasy no one dared to correct.

“Should he be sleeping this much? Why is his nose running? If he’s left alone for a moment, I will have someone whipped.” Suddhodana’s demands were incessant and maddening. As was the custom, Maya would be quarantined for a month after the delivery, subject to cleansing and religious rituals. Suddhodana chafed at this, but he could do nothing about it except sneak in by candlelight after the queen was asleep to gaze at her for a few moments. He wondered if new mothers always looked so wan and weak. Suddhodana pushed his troubling thoughts aside.

“Let him always be clothed in silk, and when they get soiled, throw them away. If you run out of silk, tear apart the court ladies’ saris if you have to.” Suddhodana wanted nothing with a hint of uncleanness to touch his son’s skin. But silk was also a symbol, since Suddhodana was on the Silk Road returning home when a messenger sent by Kumbira reached him with the news that he had a son and a wife who were both alive.

Every morning the king strode forward through the ring of women that stood fanning the young prince with their shawls. Reaching down into the cradle, he withdrew his son and held him aloft. He stripped off the diaper.

“Look at him.” Suddhodana displayed his son in all his naked glory. “Well made.” All of the ladies knew what he was referring to. Kakoli, the royal nurse, started to mumble something agreeable.

“Impressively made,” Suddhodana said. “Not that I have your experience, Kakoli.” Suddhodana laughed and thought again how easy it was with his son in his arms. “Don’t blush, you old hypocrite. If he was twenty years older and we could take forty years off you, you’d fall off your feet running after it.”

Kakoli shook her head and said nothing. The handmaidens tittered and blushed. Suddhodana was certain they were more entertained than scandalized by his bluntness.

ASITA AWOKE in the forest thinking about demons. He hadn't for many years. He could remember glimpsing one or two in the past, on the fringes of a famine or a battle, wherever bodies were being harvested. He knew the misery they caused, but misery was no longer Asita's concern. He had been a forest hermit for fifty years. The affairs of the world had been kept far away, and he passed whole days in a hidden cave when he retreated even from the affairs of animals, much less those of men.

Now Asita knelt by a stream and considered. He distinctly saw demons in his mind's eye. They had first appeared in the dappled sunlight that fell on his eyelids at dawn. Asita slept on boughs strewn over the bare ground, and he liked the play of light and shadow across his eyes in the early morning. His imagination freely saw shapes that reminded him of the market village where he grew up. He could see hawking merchants, women balancing water jugs on their heads, camels and caravans—anything, really—on the screen of his closed eyes.

But never demons, not before this morning. Asita walked into the nearly freezing mountain stream, his body naked except for a loincloth. As an ascetic, he did not wear clothes, not even the robes of a monastic order. Lately he had felt an impulse to travel very high, nearly in sight of the snowcapped peaks on the northern border of the Sakya kingdom. Which put him close to other *lokas*, worlds apart from Earth. Every mortal is confined to the Earth plane, but like the dense air of the jungle tapering gradually into the thin atmosphere of the mountains, the material world tapered off into subtler and subtler worlds. Devas had their own lokas, as did the gods and demons. Ancestors dwelt in a loka set apart for spirits in transition from one lifetime to the next.

Asita had been raised on this knowledge. He knew also that all these planes merged into each other like wet dyed cloths hung too close on the line, the blue bleeding into the red, the red into the saffron yellow. Lokas were apart and together at the same time. Demons could move among

humans, and often did. The reverse, a mortal visiting the demon loka, was much rarer.

He plunged his head under the water, then flung it back, sending long streams dripping from his uncut beard and hair. On days when he needed food, Asita carried his begging bowl down into one of the villages. Not even the youngest child was frightened to see a naked old man on the street with hair and beard down to his waist. Ascetics were a normal sight, and it was a sacred duty, if a wandering hermit showed up at one's door near sunset, to offer food and hospitality.

Asita wasn't hungry this day, however. There were other ways to keep the *prana*, or life current, going. If he did visit the demon loka, it would take enormous prana to sustain his body. There would be no air for his lungs to breathe among the demons.

He allowed the brilliant Himalayan sun to dry his body as he walked above the tree line. Demons do not literally live on mountaintops, but Asita had learned special powers that allowed him to penetrate the subtle world. He had to get as far away as possible from human beings to exercise these abilities. The atmosphere was dense around population. In Asita's eyes a quiet village was a seething cauldron of emotions; every person—except only small infants—was immersed in a fog of confusion, a dense blanket of fears, wishes, memories, fantasy, and longing. This fog was so thick that the mind could barely pierce it.

But in the mountains Asita could find a bedrock of silence. Sitting in that enveloping emptiness, he could direct his mind, as clean as the flight of an arrow, to any object or place. It was really the mind that went to the demon loka, but Asita had such one-pointed clarity that he could travel with it.

And so it came about that the demon king Mara found himself staring at a most unwelcome intruder. He glared at the naked old man sitting in lotus position before his throne. Nothing like it had happened in a long while.

“Go away,” Mara growled. “Just because you got here doesn’t mean you can’t be destroyed.” The old man didn’t move. His yogic concentration must have been strong, because his lean brown body, as tough as the sinew showing under its skin, grew sharper in outline. Mara would have commanded some lesser demons to torment the intruder, but these hermits weren’t so easily dismissed, so Mara bided his time.

After a moment the old man’s eyes opened. “You do not welcome me?” His voice was mild, but Mara read irony in it.

“No! There’s nothing for you here.” The dead and departed passed through Mara’s hands, but it displeased him to meet mortals under any other circumstances.

“I didn’t come for myself. I came for you,” the old man said. He rose and looked around. The demon loka is a world as varied as the material world, and it has its regions of greater and lesser pain. Since torment did not threaten Asita, he beheld only a dense, noxious fog surrounding him. “I bring you news.”

“I doubt it.” Mara moved restlessly in his seat. As temple paintings often depict him, his throne was made of skulls. His body was red with flames spitting around it, and instead of one horrible face he possessed four, which turned like a weathervane, presenting fear, temptation, disease, and death.

“Someone is coming to meet you. Soon, very soon,” Asita said.

“Millions have met me,” Mara shrugged. “Who are you?”

“I am Asita.” The old hermit stood up and faced Mara directly. “Buddha is coming.” This caused a slight tremor, nothing more, to run through Mara’s body. Asita noticed it. “I knew you would be intrigued.”

“I doubt you know anything.” Mara wasn’t simply being arrogant. To him, Asita was a blank. There was nothing to hold on to, no ground for temptation or fear to stand on. “Who picked you as messenger? You’re deluded.”

Asita ignored this and repeated the word that had made Mara tremble. “Buddha is coming. I hope you’re prepared.”

“Silence!”

Until that moment Mara had paid as much attention to Asita as to a small seasonal famine or an insignificant plague. Now he leaped from his throne and shrank to human size, keeping only one of his four demonic faces, death. “What if he comes? He’ll abandon the world, just as you did. Nothing more.”

“If you believe that, then you have forgotten what Buddha can do,” Asita said calmly.

“Really? Look!” Mara opened his mouth, which was solid blackness behind his fangs. The blackness expanded, and Asita could see the mass of suffering that Mara embodied. He saw a web of souls caught in turmoil, a tangle of war and disease and every version of pain that the demons could devise.

When he felt that the spectacle had had its effect, Mara slowly closed his mouth again, and the darkness receded back inside him. “Buddha?” he said contemptuously. “I’ll make them think that he’s the demon.” The prospect brought a smile.

“Then let me speak as a friend, and I will tell you your fatal weakness,” Asita said. He sat down in lotus position, folding his legs over each other, making the *mudra* of peace with his thumb and forefinger. “Being the monarch of fear, you’ve forgotten how to be afraid yourself.”

Enraged by this insult, Mara roared and swelled to monstrous size as the hermit suddenly faded away. He could feel the possibility of Buddha like the faintest light before dawn. Still, Mara was blind. He believed humans would ignore yet another pure soul. This was a mistake. The child on the horizon would be noticed because what he stood for was destiny.

3

The silk curtains to Maya's chamber parted, and Kumbira rushed out. The only thing she could be grateful for was that no one else knew yet. Her slippers padded quickly, quietly down the corridor. Night had fallen. The seventh day of the full moon was rising after the baby prince's birth, casting bars of ghostly light onto the polished teak floors of the palace. Kumbira paid no attention.

After dinner Suddhodana had retired to the nursery to be alone with his son. When Kumbira ran in, breathless and speechless, her face wore an expression he had seen only once before, when his father, the old king—

“No!”

The cry sprang from him involuntarily. Horror chased the gladness from his heart and clamped tight bands around his chest.

Sorrowfully, Kumbira drew her sari over her head to mask her face. Tears dripped from her tired eyes.

“What have you monsters done to her?” Suddhodana demanded. He swept past Kumbira, knocking her to the ground with a glancing blow. At the canopied bed, the king tore the drawn sheets away to reveal his wife. Maya looked as if she only slept, but the stillness that claimed her was complete. Suddhodana dropped to his knees and took her hands, whose coolness seemed temporary, the kind he could rub away whenever she felt a chill. Involuntarily he started to rub them now.

Kumbira allowed an hour to pass before she crept into the room with a retinue of court ladies. They were there to console but also to bring dignity. Grief, like everything else surrounding a king, was a matter of ritual. The moment Suddhodana consented to leave, attendants were prepared with ointments, winding sheets, and ceremonial marigolds to adorn the body. The wailing women were on call, and of course a dozen Brahmins with prayers and censers.

“Highness.” With a word, Kumbira brought all this to the king’s attention. Suddhodana looked up blankly. Kumbira waited a moment to see if she would have to repeat herself. As he gently placed Maya’s arm across her chest, Suddhodana shuddered. It wasn’t just that his wife had often slept that way, one arm folded across herself, the other across him. It was also that the king felt a slight stiffness creeping into Maya’s limbs. Touch being the sense most cherished by lovers, he knew that he could never touch her again. He nodded curtly, and the wailing in the corridors began.

Grief is to demons what music is to mortals. Unseen and unheard, Mara walked through the palace. The formality of death is strict. Yama, the lord of death, is aware of every last breath, and he gives permission for the *jiva*, or individual soul, to pass into the other world. The lords of karma await to assign the next lifetime, sitting in judgment over the person’s good and bad actions. Cosmic justice is meted out by the *devas*, the celestial beings who lavish the soul with rewards for good actions, and the *asuras*, or demons, who rain down punishment for wrongdoing. Demons do not have a free hand, however. The law of karma is precise and exacts only the punishment that is deserved, not an ounce more.

This made Mara’s presence unnecessary, since Maya was already in the care of the three *devas* who had come to her in her dream and who met her again as she took her last breath. To die in one world brings birth in another. But Maya lingered in her body as long as she could. She willed her last spark of life energy to flow through her hand to Suddhodana as he knelt by the bed clutching it.

None of this concerned Mara, however. He walked past her bedchamber and directed his steps farther, to the nursery, which was now empty of nurses, guards, and priests. The new baby was completely unprotected. Mara crossed to the cradle and peered down at the wide-eyed child. The young prince lay on his back with his throat bared to the first predator that walked by.

But even the king of demons cannot cause physical harm directly. Demons' work is to amplify the mind's suffering. Mara would try to do that with this child, since no baby is born without the seeds of pain in its mind. Gazing down at the cradle, Mara let his face slide through a number of nightmarish masks. *You'll never see your mother again*, Mara thought. *She's gone away, and they are hurting her*. Siddhartha kept his gaze fixed, yet Mara was sure that the baby had heard. In fact, Siddhartha recognized him. Mara was sure of it.

"Good," the demon said. "You showed up."

He leaned closer to whisper in the baby's ear. "Tell me what you want. I'm listening." This was always the key, to play upon your opponent's desire. "Can you hear me in there?" The baby kicked his feet.

"So many souls need you," Mara said wistfully, resting his arms on the cradle. "But here's the joke." He paused to lean in closer. "When you fail, they'll wind up with *me!* I'm letting you in on the secret so you won't say I was unfair. Become a saint. It will only make you a better instrument of destruction. Won't that be delicious?" As if in answer to his question, the wailing over the dead queen grew louder. The baby looked away and fell quickly asleep.

FUNERAL SMOKE, oily and thick, twisted through the air and tainted the sky as Maya's body burned atop the huge pile of sandalwood logs that had been chopped from the forest. The *ghatraj*, king of the funeral site, was a huge, sweaty man. His face reddened as he shouted orders for more wood, a higher flame, more melted ghee to pour over the body. The ghee had

been churned from the milk of sacred cows. Priests walked slowly around the pyre chanting while the wailing women tossed thousands of marigolds into the fire. Behind them hired mourners whipped themselves in their grief and endlessly circled the body.

The spectacle made Suddhodana sick. He had defied the Brahmins by not taking Maya down to the ghats by the river. On his orders the funeral pyre had been built in the royal gardens. Maya had remembered playing there as a child, when noble girls from the region were brought to court on the chance that any might please young Suddhodana. It was fitting that her last resting place would be somewhere she loved. Secretly Suddhodana knew that this was a gesture born of guilt as much as of love. He was the one who still had a future.

Canki, the highest Brahmin, finished the rites by lifting an ax in the air. The most sacred moment had arrived, when he would pray for the release of Maya's soul while Suddhodana smashed the remains of her skull to release the spirit inside. The king approached the pyre, his expression stony. He glanced down at a necklace in his fist crafted of rubies and gold. He'd given it to Maya on their wedding night, and now he gently placed it next to the skull.

When Suddhodana turned away without raising the ax, Canki didn't hesitate to put his hand on the king's arm—for the moment, he was ruler here.

“You must.”

Suddhodana held no deep contempt for the priesthood, and he knew that he had broken a sacred custom when his role was to uphold it. But at that moment the priest's touch revolted him. He turned his back and walked steadily toward the palace.

A woman was blocking his path. “You must look on him, Your Majesty. Please.”

In the moment it took for him to hear these words, Suddhodana realized that Kakoli the nurse was blocking his

way. She carried Siddhartha in her arms and hesitantly pushed him forward. Tears glittered in her eyes. “He’s precious. He’s a gift.” Since his wife’s death, the king had had nothing to do with his son. He couldn’t help feeling that if the boy had never been born, his wife would yet live.

“I should look at him? Let him look at this.”

Suddhodana glared at the nurse as he snatched the infant from her. The baby started to cry as his father lifted him above the heads of the mourners, giving him a good look at the smoldering corpse.

“Sire!” Kakoli tried to grab the child back, but Suddhodana fended her off. Everyone turned around to stare. Suddhodana defied them with a look.

“His mother died!” he shouted. “I have nothing left.” He wheeled on Kakoli. “Is that part of the gift?” The old nurse covered her mouth with one shaking hand. Her weakness only enraged Suddhodana further. He took a step toward her and was glad to see her shrink back from his threat. “Stop sniveling. Let Siddhartha behold what this filthy world is really like.”

He handed the baby back and strode toward the palace. He entered the great hall, his eyes looking for a new target that would promise more fight than women and priests. Suddhodana needed a battle right now, something he could throw himself at with abandon.

He stopped short at what he saw. An old charwoman was kneeling on the floor, scraping ashes out of the fireplace with her gnarled hands. Gray, unkempt hair hung down in her rheumy eyes. When she looked at him, she smiled, revealing a toothless maw. Suddhodana trembled. His own personal demon was here. He stood frozen in place, wondering bleakly what harm she meant him.

The old crone shook her head as if in sympathy. Slowly she took a fistful of ash from the cold embers and held it over

her head, letting the ash trickle down into her hair. She was mocking the mourners outside and him at the same time.

Your poor, beautiful wife. We have her now. And we love her as much as you did.

The char rubbed ash in her face, making dark streaks and smudges until only her wrinkled mouth and piercing eyes were left untouched. She had him trapped. If he broke down, releasing all his pent-up grief and horror, it would open a breach that the demons could exploit. Every time he thought of Maya his mind would be invaded by hideous images. But if he resisted her, clamping down his grief with steel bands, there would never be a release, and the demons would hover around him.

The crone knew all this and waited for his reaction. Suddhodana's eyes lost their anxiety and became hard as flint. In his mind's eye he conjured up Maya's face, then he took an ax and smashed her memory, once and for all. The air around him stank of funeral smoke drifting in from the garden. He had made the warrior's choice.

A HUNDRED OIL LAMPS flickered in the reception hall, each one held high as courtiers craned for a better look. At first the spectacle had been fairly calm, but when the animal sacrifices began, the cries of baby goats and the gleaming of knives changed the atmosphere. Restless now, the courtiers began to mill around, raising a clamor over the chanting Brahmins.

In the middle of the melee stood Suddhodana, growing impatient. It was the official naming ceremony for his new son, and also the time when the baby's birth chart would be read aloud by the court astrologers, the *jyotishis*. Siddhartha's destiny would be pronounced and his whole life affected from this moment on. But pronounce was the one thing they weren't doing. Instead, the four old men bent over the cradle, stroking their beards, mouthing ambiguous commonplaces. "Venus is beneficly placed. The tenth house shows promise, but the full

moon is aligned with Saturn; his mind will take time to develop.”

“How many of you are still alive?” Suddhodana grumbled. “Four? I thought there used to be five.”

The implied threat was empty. Astrologers were strange but revered creatures, and the king knew it was dangerous to cross them. They belonged to the Brahmin caste, and although the king could hire them, he was only of the Kshatriya caste, which meant that in the eyes of God they were his superiors. After Maya’s funeral Suddhodana had spent days alone, refusing to unbolt his bedroom door. But there was a kingdom to look after, a line of succession to hold up to the world and his lurking enemies. It would be a sign of weakness for Suddhodana’s entire lineage if the astrologers had anything dark to say.

“Is he safe, or is he going to die? Tell me now,” Suddhodana demanded.

The eldest jyotishi shook his head. “It was the mother’s karma to die, but the son is safe.” These words were potent; everyone in the room heard and believed them. They would deter a potential assassin, in case someone had been hired to clandestinely murder the prince. Now the stars predicted the failure of any such attempt.

“Go on,” the king demanded. The nearby clamor subsided in anticipation.

“The chart belongs to one who will become a great king,” the eldest jyotishi intoned, making sure that these words too were heard by as many people as possible.

“Why didn’t you say so to begin with? Get on with it. Let’s have it all.” Suddhodana was barking impatiently, but inside he felt tremendous relief.

The astrologers glanced nervously at one another. “There are...complications.”

“Meaning what, exactly?” Suddhodana glared, daring them to take back a word of their prediction. The eldest jyotishi

cleared his throat. Canki, the high Brahmin, moved in closer, sensing that he might have to intervene.

“Do you trust us, Your Highness?” the eldest jyotishi asked.

“Of course. I’ve only executed one astrologer, maybe two. What do you mean to say?”

“The chart foresees that your son will not rule Sakya.” Dramatic pause as the king cursed under his breath. “He will hold dominion over the four corners of the earth.”

At this, general consternation broke out. Courtiers gasped, a few applauded, most were stunned. The jyotishi’s words had their intended effect. But Siddhodana stiffened.

“How much am I paying you? Too much. You expect me to believe such a thing?” He forced a bemused tone. He wanted to test the old man’s resolve.

Before the jyotishi could find a reply, however, there was a stirring in the crowd. The oil lamps, which had moved back and forth in the air like wandering stars, became still. Courtiers parted and bowed, making way for someone who had just entered the room—an eminence.

Asita, Asita.

Siddhodana didn’t have to hear the whispered name as it was passed along. He knew Asita on sight; they had met long ago. When Siddhodana was seven, he had been woken up by guards in the middle of the night. A pony was waiting for him beside his father, who rode a black charger. The old king said nothing, only nodding for the retinue to move forward. Siddhodana felt nervous, as his father often made him feel. They rode in a pack of guardsmen toward the mountains, and just when the boy thought he would fall asleep in the saddle, the old king stopped. He had the boy placed in his arms, and they went alone up a scree slope toward a cave above their heads. The mouth of the cave was hidden behind brush and fallen boulders, but his father seemed to know where to go.

He stood in the dawn light and called, “Asita!” After a moment a naked hermit came out, neither obedient nor defiant. “You have blessed my family for generations. Now bless my son,” the king said. The boy stared at the naked man, who appeared by his beard, which was not yet completely gray, to be no more than fifty. How could he have blessed anyone for generations? Then the old king set him on his feet; Suddhodana ran forward and knelt before the hermit.

Asita leaned over. “Do you really want a blessing?” The boy felt confused. “Tell me truthfully.”

Suddhodana had received many blessings in his short lifetime; the Brahmins were summoned if the heir apparent had so much as a runny nose. “Yes, I want your blessing,” he said automatically.

Asita gazed at him. “No, you want to kill. And conquer.” The boy tried to protest, but Asita cut him short. “I am only telling you what I see. You don’t need a blessing to destroy.” As he said these words, the hermit held his hand over the boy’s head, as if administering what had been asked for. He nodded toward the old king, who stood some distance away out of earshot.

“Take death’s blessing,” Asita said. “It’s the one you deserve, and it will serve you well in the future. Go.”

Bewildered but not offended, the boy got to his feet and ran back to his father, who seemed satisfied. But as time unfolded, the boy came to see that his father was a weak king, vassal to rulers around him who dominated with stronger will and greater armies. He came to be ashamed of this fact, and although he never quite knew what Asita meant by death’s blessing, Suddhodana did not object when his own nature turned out to be fierce and ambitious.

“You honor us.” Suddhodana dropped to his knees as Asita approached. The hermit looked older now, but not three decades older, the time since they had last met. Asita ignored the king and walked directly to the cradle. He glanced down, then he turned to face the jyotishis.

“The chart.” Asita waited until the scroll of sheepskin was passed to him. He gazed at it for a moment.

“A great king. A great king.” Asita repeated the words in a flat, emotionless voice. “He will never be.”

Tense silence.

Asita replied, “What do I care about thrones?” He might have been indifferent to the king, but Asita could not take his eyes away from the baby.

“Without a doubt there is a great ruler in his chart,” the eldest jyotishi insisted.

“Do you not see that?” Suddhodana asked anxiously.

But the hermit acted strangely. Without replying, he knelt before the baby with his head bowed. Siddhartha, who had been quiet up to now, took an interest in this new person; he kicked his feet, and one of them brushed the top of Asita’s head. Suddenly tears began to roll down Asita’s cheeks. Suddhodana bent down to lift him to his feet. The revered ascetic allowed this gesture, which under normal circumstances would have been a serious affront to a holy man.

“What did you ask?” he said, seeming like a withered old man at that moment.

“My son—why will he not rule? If he’s fated to die, tell me.”

Asita looked at the king as if noticing him for the first time. “Yes, he will die—to you.” The court stirred restlessly, but Suddhodana, who should have asked all this in private, was beyond caring who overheard. “Explain yourself,” he said.

Asita paused, seeing confusion and dismay in the king’s face. “The boy has two destinies. Your jyotishis were right about only one.”

Although he was speaking to the father, Asita’s gaze never moved from the infant. “Your will is to make him a king. He

may grow up to choose the other way. His second destiny.”

Suddhodana looked totally bewildered. “What is this second destiny?”

“To rule his own soul.” A relieved smile crossed the king’s face. “You think that’s so easy?” said Asita.

“I think only a fool would exchange the world for such a destiny, and I will make damn sure my son isn’t a fool.”

“Once he dies to you, you will be sure of nothing.” The king’s smile vanished. “You’re making a mistake. Ruling the world is child’s play. To truly rule your soul is like ruling creation. It is above even the gods.”

The old hermit wasn’t finished. “You too are in his chart. It says you will either suffer over your son as no father ever has or you will bow down before him.”

Suddhodana’s disbelief was a roar. “You’re wrong, old monk. I can turn him into what *I* want.” Suddhodana’s face was mottled with rage. “Now get out! All of you!”

Even for gossip-hungry courtiers, the drama had been too much. Half the oil lamps had already sputtered out. In the dim light their retreating figures looked like insubstantial shadows bowing their way out of the king’s presence. The jyotishis led the way with profuse apologies and anxious blessings. Canki wanted to be last in the room, but he found it politic to go when the king glared daggers at him. After a moment only Asita was left.

With the audience gone, Suddhodana could speak freely. “Is all that you said true? Is there nothing I can do?”

“No matter what I say, you will do it anyway.” Without reproof, Asita began to leave, only to be held back once more.

“Tell me just one thing. Why did you weep tears when you saw my son?” asked Suddhodana.

“Because I will not live long enough to hear the immortal truth that Buddha will speak,” Asita said.

4

The next morning Suddhodana rode his warhorse up the hillside toward the imposing Shiva temple his father had built on the crest. The king's melancholy had changed overnight, replaced by determination. A score of bullock carts were gathered outside the temple gates, the great patient beasts searching lazily for grass sprouting from the earth packed hard by the sandals of devotees.

Suddhodana dismounted and let his horse graze with the bullocks. He strode into the main temple courtyard, which was filled with milling worshippers and sellers of sandalwood and ghee for ritual offerings. Awed eyes followed his progress, but Suddhodana had no time for ceremony. He had ridden without an entourage because he had a secret purpose in mind; he didn't summon Canki to the palace because he was too impatient to wait for him.

Now he burst into the inner sanctum, where the air was a heavy, sweet-smelling pall. A lone priest was performing the ritual Rudravishek. Slowly he poured ladles of milk over a tall polished stone, the Shiva lingam. The liquid left a faint blue veil on the ancient river rock. In the darkness Suddhodana's eyes narrowed; they stung from the residue of pitch and incense hanging in the air.

“Canki!”

The priest stopped the oblation and turned toward the bellowing voice. The king's eyesight had adjusted, and he recognized the high Brahmin himself at the altar. Some rich devotee, probably marrying a third or fourth wife, had paid handsomely for the ceremony.

After a glance Canki turned back to his task. "I'm not finished yet," he said.

The king came up and seized the ladle from his hands. "You are now."

Canki bowed, then led the king away, padding silently over the stone floor on bare feet. He was quite capable of defying royalty, protected by his Brahmin privilege. Canki was solid and imposing, despite the rolls of fat exposed as he went, bare-chested, across the cobbled courtyard toward the cloister where the monks lived. The Brahmin lowered his heavy body onto a leather stool inside his cell, pointedly not waiting for the king to take a seat first. Suddhodana let the insult pass. "If you talk to God, you already know why I'm here," he said.

"I know that God wishes to please you in every way, Your Highness." Canki gave a fawning smile meant to win over an angry king.

"I want my son to rule the world." Suddhodana said the words without hesitation. "Is this possible?"

"Every father would want—"

Suddhodana stepped closer, magnifying the threat he posed. "No! Either this is God's will or it's not. You are to tell me. Much rests on this. More than your life, in fact."

The balance between castes was delicate. If the rulers had a political reason to support religion, they did; if the priests needed to bring the people under their sway, they exerted influence over the rulers by promises of divine favor. Canki knew the system very well, and he also knew, despite his high caste, whose hand rested on the sword.

He said, "You face many obstacles in this endeavor, Your Highness. But it can be done."

"How?"

"Seek to control the infant prince's mind. He must be taught to think like you. To believe like you. And to lust as you lust."

This last was a barb, but Suddhodana waited patiently, hearing truth in the Brahmin's words. If anyone knew how to control others' minds, Canki did.

“Train him well, as a complete warrior. Place his whole sense of worth on fighting, and on you.” Canki paused. “Am I helping?”

Suddhodana realized at that moment why the jyotishis had been so nervous. They had consulted the high Brahmin as soon as they cast Siddhartha's chart. No doubt they could foretell the king's displeasure.

“Is that all I have to do?” Suddhodana's tone was cutting; they both knew his suspicion toward priests.

“No. The most difficult part comes last.” Canki went to the window and pointed outside at a large stone statue of Shiva. “I am reminded of Lord Shiva's story. You know it, of course.” This was another barb; the Brahmin continued without waiting for a reply.

“Venerable sages had gathered in the forest to meditate, and Lord Shiva desired to learn from them. But he was mischievous, and he brought a woman with him to their retreat. This was a test, for the woman was actually Lord Vishnu in disguise. But the sages were too blinded with rage to see this. They vowed to kill this sacrilegious intruder, so from the sacred fire they engendered a monstrous tiger. The beast leaped upon Shiva, but with one fingernail he stripped the tiger of his skin and wrapped it around his shoulders. Then he thanked the sages for their courtesy in supplying him with a meditation cloak.

“The sages' fury redoubled after this impudence. The sacred fire absorbed their rage, and a second monster sprang out, this time an enormous serpent. But Shiva choked it with his hands and wrapped the carcass around his neck. He thanked the sages for providing him with a necklace. At that point they grew so furious that a third monster sprang from the fire—”

“Stop!” Suddhodana’s patience had reached its limit. “If you think what I must do is too difficult, spare me your parables. Just tell me outright.”

“Make your son a total prisoner.”

The starkness of these words hit Suddhodana in his chest like a rock. Canki read his dismay and hurried on.

“This is a soul whose spiritual tendencies will be almost uncontrollable, and your only chance is when the boy is young. To make Siddhartha into a great king, never let him leave these walls,” the high Brahmin said. “He must believe this is a paradise. If he once sees suffering, your son will never obey you again. You’ll lose him forever.”

Suddhodana was stunned. “For how long must I do this?”

“Thirty-two years.”

“And there’s no other way?” The king had become extremely deliberate, as if weighing a death sentence. It revolted him to think that he had acquired a conspirator. Someone who had power over him from this day on. He felt smothered by the rage and helplessness whirling inside him.

Involuntarily his sword arm moved, and the next instant he had the Brahmin pinned to the floor with the edge of his blade. “You think you’ve achieved something today? Then remember the rest of Shiva’s story. Out of the sacred fire leaped a third monster, a hideous dwarf. Shiva pounced upon it and held its throat under his heels, crushing it. Who was that dwarf?”

“Ignorance.” Canki choked out the word.

“Don’t prey upon my ignorance, then. I know more than you suppose.” The king released the priest from underfoot. Suddhodana’s nature couldn’t be held in check. It was only tempered by this gnawing desire, only a day old but gripping at his spleen, to father the ruler of the world.

He departed with one last word for Canki. “Just be sure that you live long enough to see what I’ll do with you if this plan fails.”

Within the hour the king issued orders, dispersing his own people and banishing them from his city. His son would never be allowed to see suffering in any form—sickness, aging, or dying. Standing on the ramparts of the castle, he could see long trains of wagons leaving Kapilavastu. The rains had already come in torrents that washed away crops and flooded houses. Those least likely to survive were the old and sick. Lepers were hunched against the rain wrapped in dirty rags to cover their faces. Cripples who could not walk the roads were tossed wholesale into supply wagons from the army, with soldiers ordered to drive them far away and dump them in remote villages. The oldest were sole survivors, and these were thrown into separate army wagons. They were told that homes awaited them in a better place, a cruel way of hinting at the reality—they would be abandoned in the forest a day away.

Only the nobles were exempted, and those under strict conditions. Venerable figures like the astrologers were sworn never to be seen by Siddhartha at any time, under pain of banishment. Others not yet old could remain at home, but if they grew ill or aged, they would be confined under house arrest. All funerals would take place at night, without public ceremony. The burning ghats were moved two miles downriver. Suddhodana knew how to organize a battle campaign, and the first rule is that victory is more important than the costs it entails. This campaign would be no different.

Ruler of the four corners of the earth. He had memorized the words in the chart. How would that feel? he wondered. After three days the great wooden gates of Kapilavastu closed; the bitter cries of those who had to leave and those who had to let them go were silenced. The job was complete.

THREE WOMEN CHASED a small boy across the park. They ran over lawns kept immaculate by slaves on their knees with clippers, through gardens filled with flowering jasmine whose fallen blossoms were swept from the path every morning. It wasn't a serious chase, but the boy, Siddhartha, pretended it

was. When he sped up or took a sudden zigzag, his pursuers did too. But you didn't have to be seven years old to notice that they never caught him.

Not only that, but the three women always ran in the same order. First came Prajapati in her gold-embroidered sari the color of peacock blue, although on other days it could be vermilion or emerald. Prajapati was the prince's aunt, sister to his dead mother. Suddhodana had formally given her the status of a wife, but the two had no conjugal relations. The king was paying honor to her and acknowledging her role as stepmother to the prince.

The heavy gold bangles in her ears tinkled softly as Prajapati ran. Behind her came two peasant girls, considerably younger and slimmer than Siddhartha's aunt. They wore coarse cotton saris with no embroidery, their ears had small silver bangles in them, and they slowed down enough so that Prajapati was always first.

"Channa, Channa!" The boy called out his friend's name.

On days like today, when the sun was out and the morning air was cool, the world his father had built for him was big enough, and he didn't wonder what lay beyond the high walls surrounding the palace grounds.

"Prince, stop!" cried one of the aunties.

"Oh, Prince, do come back!" another begged.

Siddhartha veered toward the stables. He wasn't running away from the women for recreation. He had made a discovery that he wanted to show Channa. As long as he was supervised, the king allowed him this freedom. The stables were much better for a boy than a palace, anyway, and once he crossed the threshold, Siddhartha's aunties always stopped short. Prajapati had never set foot in a stable, and although the peasant girls certainly had, their newfound station as royal servants prevented them from entering a precinct where only males belonged.

Hearing his name, Channa appeared at the stable door. He jumped and waved his fists, encouraging Siddhartha on. If it had been him racing the prince, he would have won easily, being taller and stronger despite the fact that they were born the same week.

Siddhartha dashed inside. "Hide!" he cried.

There was no need for him to be hidden from anybody. The rules of the chase were well known to all, but Channa grabbed Siddhartha by the arm and pulled him inside, as if hauling a fellow soldier to safety inside an armed fortress. The two boys raced past the stalls where warhorses were kept when in heat or giving birth to spring foals. Their heels kicked up clouds of dried dung that the sun turned into glowing auras around them.

"Here!" Channa led the way to a feed bin. It smelled of fresh hay with a sour undertone of rotted hay beneath. This was a favorite retreat since they could burrow as deep into the hay as they wanted to escape detection. Siddhartha perched on top of a nearby bale and reached into his pants. He pulled out a tiny creature.

Channa's face fell. "It's just an ant," he said, disappointed.

"No, it isn't. Look closer."

The feed bin was dim, but now Channa saw that the insect, a large black soldier ant common around the stables, was still clutching its prey, a dead termite, in its jaws. The termite, which wore stiff papery wings, was newly hatched and twice as large as the ant.

"Where did you find it?" asked Channa, still unimpressed. But he saw that Siddhartha was excited.

"By the water fort." This referred to one of the floating pavilions on the shore of a lotus pond in the park. "I saw the whole battle."

The event had taken place that morning when Prajapati found Siddhartha wandering away from the palace. He was sitting on the ground beside the pavilion staring intently at the

dirt. A string of black soldier ants was clashing with sentry termites at the entrance of a small colony.

Prajapati stopped a few feet away. “Who’s winning?” she asked.

“That doesn’t matter. It’s something else.”

Siddhartha was staring at a particular soldier ant carrying a dead termite in its jaws. The ant had reached an obstacle in its path, a large pebble. The pebble was five times the ant’s size, and it was already carrying a load twice its weight. For half a second the ant paused, then it started to climb up the pebble. The way was too steep and it fell back, but this was no deterrent. The ant climbed up again, fell back again, climbed up a third time.

“How foolish! It should just go around,” Prajapati said.

Siddhartha shook his head. “The mighty don’t go around.”

“Is an ant so mighty?”

The boy ignored her amused tone. “*He* thinks he is. That’s what counts.”

“I could step on him. Then how mighty would he be?”

At that moment the boy said something quite surprising. “God could step on my father, but he still thinks he’s mighty.”

Prajapati was nonplussed. “It’s not the same thing.”

“Why not?”

Siddhartha glanced at her with his wide brown eyes, eyes that had seemed twice the normal size when he was an infant. But before his aunt could reply, he returned to the ant, scooping it up in his hand. His whole attention was focused on it. “If you think you’re mighty, that’s all that counts. No one is really mighty.”

What a strange child you are, Prajapati thought, but she hid this from Siddhartha, saying, “I never thought of it that way.”

“What do you think?” he now asked Channa, having told him everything.

Without a word his friend shot his hand forward and pinched the black ant in half between two fingers. “I think we need to find a better game. That one’s no good.”

He shoved Siddhartha into the hay, and when the prince came up sputtering stalks of long grass, he shoved back. The boys’ tussle was interrupted. “Channa!” The boys looked up as if on command from the god of the stables.

Bikram appeared at the gate of the feed bin, his bulk almost filling it. He wore a thick leather apron and metal-fitted leggings, as he always did in mating season when a stallion could unexpectedly lash out with its hooves.

Stooping, Bikram picked up a clod of horse manure and flung it at the two peasant girls lingering at the stable door. Prajapati had left them to wait until Siddhartha emerged again. The girls squealed as the clod barely missed them; they had already started backing away. Siddhartha and Channa crowed in triumph.

Bikram wasn’t smiling. “I need you, boy.”

Channa ran after his father, who was the king’s stablemaster when there was no battle to fight. Not that there had been many since the birth of the prince. The kingdoms of Kosala and Magadha to the east had made peace with Suddhodana, and he had relinquished his need for raiding frontier villages to add to his domain.

Although he was less than half the size of his broad, beefy father, Channa’s frame promised that same height and bulk one day. He could hear commotion from a far stall that was different from horses in heat. Bikram noticed that Siddhartha was trailing behind them. “Not you, young prince,” he said. “Just the boy.”

Siddhartha stopped short, confused. “Why not?”

“Because your father would have my hide. This isn’t for your eyes. Stay put until me and the boy come back for you.”

Bikram wasn't stern with the seven-year-old, who was never addressed as "boy." He just made clear what was needed. Siddhartha obeyed automatically.

He hung back as Channa and his father rounded the corner and entered an open stall. The gate shut behind them. Siddhartha squatted in the straw-covered dirt. His eyes roamed over the array of saddles and bridles hanging on the wall; he caught the clinking of hammers on the smithy's forge out back. Listening intently, he thought he heard Bikram's muttered voice, then Channa's.

The boy was uneasy being left alone. He had a secret. Not the kind he was ashamed to reveal so much as one he couldn't fathom. To escape thinking about it, he gazed up at the stable roof. It was old, and the timbers had warped over the winter, letting in the rain and beams of bright sunlight when the weather was clear.

His eyes caught a sunbeam now, and he watched motes of dust dance in it.

Look closer.

Siddhartha shivered and tried not to listen. The words in his head didn't feel like his own. They came unlike ordinary thoughts. The voice had begun about a week earlier—this was his secret—and almost always said the same thing. *Look closer.*

The sunbeam fell warmly across his eyelids, and he felt dreamy. The dust motes seemed to seize his attention and grow bigger.

What if we are made of dust? All things that come from the earth are only dust.

Siddhartha looked down at his arm and brushed away the film of dried dung that had settled on it. More dust flew up into the sunlight.

I am just dust, he thought.

He jumped to his feet and began to run.

Only dust.

The voice had turned on him, was suddenly harsh and mocking. Siddhartha didn't want to hear it anymore, and it was all the boy could do not to cry. He raced toward the stall where Channa had gone. He paused at the gate, not wanting to be seen this way, weak and shaken. Above him, in the shadowy rafters, an unseen figure sat. Eyes watched the boy trying to calm down, and a calculating mind considered its next move.

Siddhartha pushed at the gate, but it was locked from the inside.

On the other side Bikram's voice was sharp. "Hold her down, I said."

Siddhartha heard a horse whinnying in pain and hooves clomping against the ground. He peered through a crack in the gate. A sick old mare was lying on her side, heaving and quivering. At one end crouched Channa, trying his best to hold the mare's head still. At the other end Bikram was tying her hind legs together with rope; he had already tied the front legs, and they clomped helplessly against the ground. Bikram stood up. Siddhartha saw the grimness in his face and the fear in Channa's.

"It's going to be all right," the boy whispered into the mare's ear, which twitched as if hearing a nearby predator. Eyes rolling wide and white with terror, the horse sensed what was coming.

"I need you to be strong," said Bikram. "You know why the prince couldn't be here for this?"

"No."

His father shrugged. "No need. Just remember, he can't be here, understand?" Channa nodded. "Once everyone's asleep tonight, we'll take her outside the gates and bury her. He doesn't ever need to know she's dead." Channa nodded again.

Above Siddhartha, an unseen figure—Mara himself—peered down, considering his next move. He had waited a long

time to rejoin the boy and draw him closer. Close enough to become a voice in his head. The demon clapped his hands, wondering if the boy might look up, but Siddhartha's eyes were fixed on the scene in the stall. Bikram picked up a heavy ax and turned the blunt side of the blade outward, like a club. He walked slowly to the mare's head.

“Look away, boy.”

Channa did as he was told; his father raised the ax high in the air, brawny knots standing out from his bare arm. Out of the corner of his eye Channa saw him bring the ax down; there was a loud thud and the crunch of bone, but in the instant before, as if sensing its fate supernaturally, the old mare screamed.

Siddhartha heard it as he ran, a piercing pitiful cry that made the other horses shiver in their stalls. He was terrified, but he hadn't witnessed the blow. Something pulled the boy away at the last second—weakness, or a better impulse?—saving him from the grisly sight. Panicked, he ran outside, putting as much distance between himself and the stables as he could. Prajapati's two young servants saw him and gave chase.

Mara knew the moment was ripe. He was suddenly beside Siddhartha, arms and knees pumping as he matched him stride for stride.

“Yah!” the demon shriled. “Giddyap! Let's see you run!”

Siddhartha turned his head, and his eyes widened. It was only a quick, panicky glance, but Mara was certain he'd been seen. It was the first time, a milestone.

Turning his gaze from the horrible sight, Siddhartha focused on the palace ahead of him. The building was huge and ornate, a thing of beauty according to every visitor the young prince had held audience with. He ran through an arched doorway, not slowing at all. Soon he reached the closed door of his father's bedroom. No one had followed him, and gradually his breath stopped burning in his chest. Cautiously, hearing the murmur of voices from within, Siddhartha tried the

lock. It was open. Moving with the natural stealth of a child, he pulled the door open and peered inside.

His father's private chambers were vast and ornate. The best silks and the finest gold made up the bedding and decorated the furniture. Polished floors gleamed with candlelight, and a small group of men huddled around his father's bed.

Suddhodana sat propped up by pillows. The men around him were court physicians, who poked and prodded, examining their royal charge gingerly.

"Get on with it," he grumbled. "If you're here to get me closer to dying, don't bother. Time is taking care of that."

Siddhartha drew back. He had never known his father to be sick, barely recognized these men as doctors. They had rarely appeared in his short life, and only before dawn. The king didn't want his son to be awake when he needed tending. But Siddhartha could vaguely remember, as if seeing through a fevered haze, the same poking and prodding he now observed.

One of the physicians gestured to another, who held a large wooden bucket with a lid. Removing it, the second physician reached inside and withdrew a large, fat leech.

"Lie back, Your Majesty. This will be the last time, I promise." The lead physician was a thick man with gentle hands. He was called Gandhik, Siddhartha remembered. Taking the leech, Gandhik applied it directly over his father's heart. It was all Siddhartha could do to remain silent when he saw the six leeches already feeding on his chest. Swollen and dark, they looked like they were trying to crawl inside him.

"Disgusting," the king snapped. "You and your so-called arts." He heaved a sigh of resignation. "Disgusting."

"Hold still, Your Majesty," Gandhik directed in a quiet, patient tone.

"I want to be strong again," Suddhodana said. Then he shook his head. "Who am I fooling? I want to be *young* again."

Lying there on the pillows, his graying hair feathered out around him, the king permitted the indignities of medicine as a distraction—they kept him from dealing with the passage of time. Every day seemed to be a weight around his neck, depriving him of another ounce of strength.

“You will be strong after this,” Gandhik promised, holding another writhing leech pinched between his forefinger and thumb. Something in his reassurance sounded false, even to himself.

“Idiots!” the king exploded. “Flatterers! I might as well suck my own blood.” He glared at the leech and struggled with giving up on the whole damned business of medicine, only to lean back, his eyes closed, no longer willing to look. “Get on with it.” Cautiously, Gandhik applied the final leech to the king’s chest.

Siddhartha’s eyes focused on this, but his mind was fixed on something he couldn’t comprehend: his father showing fear. This sent tremors through him, as if he had been standing on a mountainside that suddenly began to slide out from under his feet. Siddhartha backed away and closed the door without a sound.

When he turned around, he nearly ran over another boy in the hallway.

“What are you, a spy?” the stranger said. He had a taunting voice and disdainful eyes, which looked down on Siddhartha almost six inches above his own eyes.

At the word *spy*, Siddhartha jumped. “I’m not,” he stammered.

The older boy’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. Siddhartha blushed with shame, and suddenly he knew without being told that someone important had just entered his life.

5

It took a moment before Siddhartha had enough presence of mind to ask, “Who are you? Why did you sneak up on me like that?”

The other boy stared without reply. He wore heavy embroidered clothes that marked him as the favored of some king’s court. Under them, his body was already developing muscles on a lean frame. He must have been at least twelve.

“I didn’t sneak up. You’re just too blind to see.”

“Sorry.”

Siddhartha’s meekness made the other boy draw himself up to his full height and cross his arms. “I came looking for you. Didn’t they tell you?” Siddhartha shook his head, which earned him a pitying look. “You don’t talk much. Do you spend the day under a rock? You look pale enough.”

Each taunt was having less and less effect. Siddhartha knew he wasn’t pale, and though cowed at first, he wasn’t afraid of the stranger. He said, “You must be my cousin. They said you were coming.”

“See? Even you can make sense if you try.”

Siddhartha said nothing. The arrival of this aggressive visitor added one more unwelcome shock to the day. His father limited the number of people who saw his son and limited even further the number who actually had a conversation with him.

“Do you think you can remember a name? Mine’s Devadatta, and I’m just as good as you are. Try and remember

that too.”

Siddhartha would have bowed in greeting and was tempted to even after this barrage. He recalled what his father had told him: “You’re getting lonely. We have to do something about that.” The next day an order was sent to summon a suitable companion, and Suddhodana congratulated himself on his choice. Devadatta was born to a branch of the Sakyan royal line and was old enough to travel on a saddle up the steep trails from his home kingdom, where he held the rank of prince.

Devadatta was tired of bantering, so he grabbed the cap Siddhartha was wearing and dangled it out of reach, watching the smaller boy try to jump up and snatch it back.

“We need to have an understanding, just you and me,” he said. “They made me leave home against my will. I’m not old enough to get my way. Not all the time, I mean.” Devadatta smiled, his mouth a narrow, tight line. “I didn’t want to come to this godforsaken place. Or to meet you.” He jammed the cap on Siddhartha’s head again.

Siddhartha took a step backward so he could bolt down the hallway if he had to.

“You’re really scared of the leeches, aren’t you?” Devadatta taunted.

“No.” Siddhartha said, ashamed that he’d been seen but not wanting anyone to think he was afraid.

Devadatta lifted his shirt to expose a dozen fresh scars all over his chest. They were bright pink half-moons against his dark skin.

“I had a fever last month; they leeches me so I wouldn’t die. That’s why they’re in there with your papa. He’ll probably die too.” Devadatta stared the smaller boy down. “I wasn’t a baby about it. Not like you. Go ahead, touch them, if you’re really not scared.”

Unwilling to endure any more, Siddhartha turned and fled down the long hallway. He wanted to get away from

everything: his cousin, the physicians with their bucket of bloodsuckers, and most of all the helpless feeling that he was trapped in a nightmare. Deriding laughter burned in his ears as he ran.

SOON SUDDHODANA WAS EXULTING in Devadatta's presence. "This is a prince of the blood. Treat him like my second son," he announced in open court. In private he set the usual spies on the newcomer, who was probably acting as a spy himself. In the king's mind he had accomplished two goals at once. His son, who showed signs of a dangerous passivity, would have a model to follow, someone close to his own age but tougher. In addition, a neighboring kingdom, intimidated by Suddhodana's wrath if it refused, had given up its heir apparent to his control. Having caught Devadatta in a trap, Suddhodana lavished smiles on the boy and catered to his whims, which promised to be precocious and plentiful.

That year, at the arrival of spring, the king threw a feast to celebrate. Siddhartha was awake before dawn, brightening up at the prospect of what lay ahead. He knew that people lived outside the palace walls, but he could only imagine what that must be like. The most mundane thing—walking along a dusty road through a market town—must be amazing (although he'd never seen a town and only knew about roads to faraway places from books). All he had to do was ask people about themselves, and Siddhartha was certain they would recount wondrous stories.

When the festivities began, however, the rush of new sensations was beyond anything he had imagined. Colorful banners emblazoned with pictures of the gods, bright lanterns, and gold-embossed decorations transformed the palace grounds into a mythical place. He ran through flocks of jugglers and acrobats; he listened open-mouthed to wandering storytellers in garish masks who had spent years learning how to keep villagers in suspense as they described Hanuman, king of the monkeys, flying with a mountain in his hands because a

rare herb that grew there was needed to heal the battle-wounded Lakshman, brother of the divine Lord Rama. The monkey god couldn't find the herb, so he ripped up the entire mountain in order to return in time. Would he? The audience gasped, ignoring the fact that they had all heard the tale a hundred times.

But nothing was better than the manic hour when the celebrants ran around the grounds hurling fistfuls of dyed powder at each other. Clouds of red, green, and yellow filled the air. Shrieking ladies ran away from panting pursuers, coyly allowing themselves to be caught, then breaking into peals of laughter as they threw dye in their paramours' faces. Within minutes everyone was covered in a patchwork of hues.

Two older girls a little ways away suddenly caught his eye. Standing beside one of the tables heavily laden with food, they chattered, pretending not to look in Siddhartha's direction.

They know I'm a prince, Siddhartha thought, smiling a little. This made him braver, and he approached, concealing the pouches of scarlet powder behind his back. He worked hard to remain innocent looking. When he was within a few feet of them, he sprang his surprise. A red fog hung in the air for a moment before the wind pulled it away. The two girls squealed and laughed, enjoying his unexpected attention considerably more than the prank. When the air cleared there was an awkward pause.

"Hello," Siddhartha said. The two girls exchanged a look, as if trying to decipher this message. The braver one took a deep breath.

"Hello," she replied. No guards descended; nothing exploded. So the other one tried saying a word. "You're the prince?" Not as if she doubted it, but as if she might not have the right to ask.

Siddhartha nodded. "My father is the king."

The girls lapsed into silence. Siddhartha wasn't sure how well things were going. He wished he weren't alone.

“Hey, cousin!”

Siddhartha turned around to see Devadatta a few feet away. He had his fist poised in the air, and a second later he threw with all his might. A green cloud billowed out. Siddhartha was reaching into his own pouch, happy to join in, when he felt a sharp pain in his forehead. He staggered back, then touched the spot. His hand came away stained a warm, sticky crimson. Devadatta had put a rock in with the powder before he threw it.

A new surprise, not the pain, held Siddhartha’s attention. He had yet to see his own blood. His cousin was laughing at him and looking toward the girls, expecting them to appreciate the joke. But they had run away in alarm. Devadatta shrugged and turned his attention back to Siddhartha. “Let’s play again, only try to stay awake this time, okay?” He stooped down to find another sharp rock.

Siddhartha was never far from watchful eyes, and it was only a moment before Suddhodana arrived on the scene as Devadatta threw his second missile, not bothering to disguise it with dye. It hit Siddhartha in the chest and made him cry out. He doubled over with a wince. Devadatta considered this a favorable outcome and had another rock in hand already, but he spied the king and hesitated. There was a small crowd around them now. Suddhodana nodded at Devadatta, “Go on.”

The boy didn’t need any more encouragement. He threw again and hit Siddhartha in the shoulder, hard enough to draw blood again. None of the onlookers came to the rescue; even Prajapati, late to arrive, glanced at the king and knew that she couldn’t interfere. Siddhartha looked around. His face flushed with shame, and he wanted to run, but his father’s voice stopped him.

“No! Stay and fight.”

The courtiers exchanged nervous glances; some of the more tenderhearted ladies clutched their hands to their breasts. Suddhodana kept his eyes on his son, watching stonily for a response. When the boy didn’t move, only gazing vaguely into

the distance, his father gave a small, almost indecipherable snort, which Devadatta took as a signal that he had won. He relaxed and dropped the rock in his fist, giving one last look of pity at his victim. He pushed his way through the spectators and was gone.

Suddhodana stepped forward and knelt beside his son. “Listen to me. You can’t let him do that. In this family, we fight.” Siddhartha hung his head, biting his lip. “You’re my only son, aren’t you?”

“Yes, Papa.”

“From now on, there’s not going to be any more ‘papa,’ you understand? From now on it’s ‘sir.’”

Siddhartha felt a rock being put into his hand, and his father’s much larger hand closed it into a fist.

“Go.”

The king stood up, and the courtiers parted the way, making a path in the direction Devadatta had gone. Siddhartha felt the sharp edges of the flinty stone against his palm. He gathered himself to run but had taken only a step when his father’s voice stopped him.

“Here, let me clean you up first.” Suddhodana bent over and wiped the blood from the boy’s forehead. “You have to see him to fight him. It might get in your eyes.” His father’s tone still had an edge, but Siddhartha instinctively knew that in those few seconds his father had changed, had felt a twinge of remorse or tenderness. The next instant he was being given a rough shove and found himself running hard toward a pavilion beside the pond where Devadatta had disappeared.

SIDDHARTHA ROUNDED THE CORNER of the pavilion by the lotus lake beyond the sight of his father. He ducked into an archway that led inside, then he made an escape near the water’s edge. He didn’t care where his cousin was. He dropped the rock clutched in his fist; the flinty edges had dug red

indentations in his palm. His other wounds were throbbing, but Siddhartha ignored the pain. He threw himself down among the tall reeds by the pond. It was almost the only real hiding place he had ever found. Panic distorts time, so he had no idea how long it was before he began to feel better. But his heart eventually stopped racing, and in the aftermath of distress he began to feel drowsy and drained.

Siddhartha was his father's son, yet he wasn't. There were no words to express why this was true. The heavy expectations weighing on his shoulders mystified him. The rocks thrown at him, the humiliation that followed—all hurt. But worse was knowing that Devadatta, a cruel stranger, filled his father's expectations better than he did. Siddhartha watched a hawk circling on motionless wings overhead. Unable to see beyond the palace walls, he could still gaze above them. Then the hawk closed its wings like scissors and dropped toward earth. In less than a second it changed from an emblem of escape to a deadly missile hurtling down upon an innocent prey.

At that moment, although he scarcely suspected it, not Siddhartha but Devadatta was the prey. Devadatta had fled from his victory in high spirits, tinged with the bitterness of knowing that he was still the king's prisoner. The boy was bored with the childishness of the festival. He slowed his pace, and then noticed that a man, a stranger, had appeared from nowhere. He was tall and cloaked in the coarse hemp of a traveler. Despite the man's stealth and the difference in their sizes, Devadatta wasn't afraid; his arrogance protected him. His hand felt for the dagger at his side.

The cloaked stranger raised an admiring eyebrow as if to say, *We have a man here after all*. He drew his own dagger.

"Come on," he said. "You deserve to die."

Devadatta backed away, startled. "Why?" His voice still betrayed no fear, and he unsheathed his own weapon, ready to fight.

"Not for anything you've done, but for what I'm going to make you do." Quicker than the eye could catch, the stranger

lunged forward, grabbed Devadatta's dagger by the blade, and snatched it from his grasp. Then he burst out laughing at the boy's stunned reaction. The stranger's hand held the razor-sharp blade tightly, yet not a drop of blood appeared.

"You were unkind to draw on me," the stranger said calmly, "but Mara is kind enough for two." He handed Devadatta his knife back. It was as hot as a burning coal, and the boy dropped it with a shriek of pain.

"Damn you, demon!"

Mara bowed ironically at being recognized so quickly. "Not many are brave enough to curse me. Not on first meeting. Usually they're more occupied with their terror."

Devadatta glared back defiantly. "Why are you here? I'm not going to die." He uttered these words with impressive certainty. Mara said nothing in reply. One arm lifted, bringing the edge of his cloak with it. The cloak was lined with black. Devadatta's gaze fell on it for an instant before the blackness seemed to expand. One moment the cloak was making a small billowy circle around Mara's head; the next it swelled to enclose the boy before the entire pavilion disappeared, and Devadatta found himself in total darkness, warm and suffocating.

With a shriek he plummeted into a looming void. There was no telling how long he fell, but it was certain that when he landed, it was with a bone-jarring crash. For a moment Devadatta writhed helplessly, the wind knocked out of him, before he became aware of hard, cold stone beneath his body.

"Where am I? Speak!" he shouted.

"Oh, I'll speak, never you fear."

Mara's voice was right beside him. Devadatta reached out to strike, as enraged as he was frightened. Or, to be more precise, he dealt with fear by turning it into rage. His fists struck empty air. Mara admired the boy. It was rare for someone so young to be fearless in peril, no matter how much was empty bravado. Mara needed someone with certain

qualities: hotheaded, reckless, unable to judge the limits of his own danger, wily but stupid enough to fall into the lure of arrogance. This one would do.

“What do you want?” Devadatta shouted into the empty blackness. He gradually became aware, however, that this blackness wasn’t total; he could see a faint glimmer in the distance. From that and the stone underneath him, he surmised that he was in a cave and, since the air was frigid, a mountain cave.

Mara could have explained everything, but he preferred to watch and wait. Arrogance and bravado have their limits, so he bided his time—an hour, then two, then six—until he heard Devadatta’s teeth chattering and sensed the despair rising in his chest.

“You are here to learn,” said Mara.

The broken silence made Devadatta jump. He controlled his anger this time; his mind had had time to work, and he knew that he was in a demon’s power. Exactly who or why was still unclear, but he had to be careful of more traps. Two were enough.

“I’m a prince; I can bargain with you,” he said, his eyes moving from side to side in case the demon showed himself. Which Mara did, appearing as he had in the pavilion, a tall stranger in a black cloak.

“You aren’t listening. I said you’re here to learn.”

“Learn what?” Pause. “I’m listening.”

Mara caught the note of defeat in the boy’s voice; he couldn’t pretend to himself any longer that he had the upper hand. “Learn to be king,” said Mara.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” the boy flared. “I’m going to be king, anyway. I don’t need you for that, whoever you are.”

“Ridiculous! My dear fool, you gave away your chances the moment you set foot away from home. There is no throne waiting for you back there, not now or ever.”

“Liar!”

This heated outburst made Mara decide to wait again, and so he delayed another few hours while Devadatta grew colder and lonelier and the weight of the demon’s words had sunk in. Then, because he knew that gratitude can be as effective as fear, Mara clapped his hands, and a small campfire appeared in the cave some yards away from the boy. Devadatta rushed over to it and warmed his shivering body. “The only throne you have a hope of capturing is Siddhartha’s,” said Mara. The firelight made Devadatta’s eyes gleam. As always, the demon had grasped an idea that was already in his victim’s mind. “His father is too strong. You cannot overthrow him. But it is through him that you will depose the son.”

Every added word inflamed Devadatta, who forgot the distress and danger he was in. He hadn’t genuinely hated his small cousin; his feelings up to now had been a mixture of pity and jealousy. “It won’t take much to get rid of him,” he said.

The cloaked stranger held up his finger. “More than you think. Much more.”

The boy took this as an insult to his physical strength, the one advantage he knew that he had over his cousin. “You don’t think I can crush him? All it takes is a knife or an arrow when we’re out hunting.”

“Think again. The king would have you killed immediately. He wouldn’t even care if you did it. He’d know it was you.”

Devadatta paused. He and Suddhodana were enough alike that he saw the truth of this. Wouldn’t he kill anyone in the vicinity of the prince if he were the father and his son died mysteriously? After a moment’s deliberation Devadatta said, “If I let you teach me, what will it cost?”

Mara laughed. “You have nothing to give. A prince without a throne is also a prince without a fortune. You must be slow if you didn’t consider that. Too slow to bargain, except with your life. I’m going.”

“Wait, you can’t leave me here!”

The boy sounded agreeably terrified. Mara clapped his hands again, and the sputtering campfire went out. He was satisfied with the opening he’d made. Let the boy rest a night in the cave. He would be afraid of freezing to death, but Mara could keep the spark of life going. He had the minutest control over death, after all.

“Wait!”

The boy called louder, but his sinking heart knew that he was alone now. There was nothing near but the settling blackness and the glimmer of light coming from the mouth of the cave. Devadatta headed for it, creeping with one hand on the stone wall to steady himself. He climbed over rubble, and he felt something—a rat?—scramble over his foot. When he reached the light, the cave opened out into a sizable mouth. Devadatta stepped from the cave onto ice-hardened snow, which extended in all directions. He was near the top of a Himalayan peak, the kind of place that the truly fearless yogis sought out for their solitude. But Devadatta felt no holy presence in this hostile landscape. There was no sign that any human being had ever been there, not the faintest trace of a trail going downslope. All Devadatta could spy was the last wink of the fading sun before it disappeared beneath the horizon. His mind searched for words and failed. Standing between himself and the fast-descending blackness was nothing.

6

It took Devadatta most of the night to figure out how to escape from the cave. While there was still a glimmer of light in the sky, he staved off despair by scouring crevices for kindling to burn and scraps of vegetation to gnaw on. Not that he could have started a fire with his bare hands. Eventually he stopped this fruitless activity and busied himself with hating Mara. He fantasized about the revenge he would wreak if he survived. The night was so thick he lost all concept of time. Finally there was nothing to do but curl up on the stone floor of the cave, shivering and defiant, and wait to die.

It took a while longer to give up hope entirely. Only when there was no possible way out did his mind stop whirling in panic, and then Devadatta considered a simple question: Could demons physically transport a person anywhere? What if the cave was just an illusion? The moment he considered this possibility, two things happened. He heard the faintest echo of Mara laughing at him, and he fell fast asleep. When he woke up, he was lying on the ground near the pavilion on the spot where the demon had shown himself. Devadatta sat up, rubbing his stiff, aching limbs. The sun was setting, and so he must have lain unconscious there for hours.

He walked onto the veranda that circled the pavilion. Torch flames were reflected on the water of the lotus pond. From the distance he heard drunken laughter. The king's revelries were continuing into the night. Devadatta headed toward the sound. For some mysterious reason his ordeal in the cave didn't drain him. He felt stronger, in fact. He craved more than ever to do exactly what he had set out to do that morning: lure one of the maids into a corner and torment

Siddhartha. Both desires came to mind again, and they aroused him to the point that he began to run. Devadatta didn't care if he ran into a girl or Siddhartha first. Neither would come away forgetting the encounter.

Why can demons roam the mind in this way, taking advantage of innocent people? What made Devadatta prey to the terrors of the cave was a tiny thing: he was claustrophobic. As an infant he had almost suffocated in his thick swaddling clothes when a careless nurse left him wrapped up in the sun. Mara knew this weakness, and all he had to do was to throw his cloak over the boy. Devadatta's mind would do the rest. It would erupt with the memory of being suffocated and begin to panic. It was easy for the demon to shape mindless panic into a nightmare. The boy couldn't wake up from the nightmare; it held him in its grip for as long as Mara wanted. A moment of terror could be transformed into a week in the dreaded cave. And Mara could accomplish the same thing with anyone.

ALONE AND DISCONSOLATE, Siddhartha roamed the grounds. It had become his habit to be alone as much as he could. He felt he had no other choice. "People seem to be afraid of me. They barely look at me or they run away. Why?" he had asked Channa not long before.

"You think I'm afraid of you?" Channa shot back.

"Not you. The whole rest of the world."

This wasn't exactly true. If you are holding a fragile egg and are afraid of dropping it, you are afraid not of the egg but of the consequences. The same was true of the courtiers around Siddhartha. So many doors were shut to Siddhartha, so many faces held low to the ground, so many eyes averted that he felt bewildered and mistook their attitude for fear. Even Bikram fell to his knees and prostrated himself when Siddhartha came into the stables. The only exception was if Channa was also present; the king had told Bikram he could stand then because a father shouldn't be humbled in front of his own son.

“They’re just scared not to be perfect,” said Channa when Siddhartha wouldn’t let the thing go. “The king would find out.”

“And then what?”

Channa pointed to the high palace walls. “He throws them out. That’s what I hear.” Channa thought of the horses he and his father buried beyond the walled perimeter. “Only they’re not dead.”

Siddhartha knew in his heart of hearts that the horses that disappeared from the stables didn’t leave alive, and it made him anxious that something dark happened to a lord or lady who suddenly vanished from the morning levee when the king assembled the court for a greeting and allowed them to watch silently as he ate breakfast. None of Siddhartha’s favorites had disappeared yet, thankfully.

“When I’m the king, nobody gets thrown over the wall,” he said, but that was a rare remark; Channa would never recall another time when Siddhartha referred to taking the throne, not in the near future, the distant future, or ever.

Siddhartha’s mind was wandering through these gloomy thoughts as he stood alone by his favorite pool, the one surrounded by tall reeds. He knelt down and paddled his hands in the cool water. The pond was shallow there, and in the shadow of a floating lotus he saw something—the nymph of a dragonfly creeping slowly over the mud. Siddhartha watched it. The miniature monster moved steadily, fearlessly, on the prowl. A tiny silver minnow swam by, and with a startling leap the nymph snatched it in its jaws. The minnow shuddered once and was still, its eyes open and shiny even as it died. Siddhartha shuddered along with it. Why did he feel the pain of such a tiny, insignificant creature?

“A very good question. Maybe it’s your gift.” Startled, Siddhartha stood up to see an old man in front of him, a hermit. His skin was brown and weather worn. He wore a flimsy silk shawl thrown over his torso and a rough hemp

skirt. The hermit was leaning on his staff by the waterside, gazing at the boy, his eyes unreadable in their depth.

The hermit said, "You found me. And very quickly at that."

"I didn't find anyone. I was just here," Siddhartha protested.

The hermit smiled, which made papery creases at the corners of his eyes, something Siddhartha had never seen before. Everything about the stranger made him seem like an apparition. "These things don't work quite the way you suppose. I am Asita."

An older boy, or a very different one, would have wanted to know how someone else's voice got into his head. Siddhartha accepted that something inexplicable could still be real. "Why are you here? Does my father know?"

"Another good question. To which I can give a simple answer, since your other question is more complicated. Your father would be very displeased to see me here. Does that matter?" Before Siddhartha could reply, Asita said, "Of course it does. He's the one you look up to."

Siddhartha took this as a criticism. "Everyone looks up to him. He's king here."

"Let's not worry about that for the moment. Have you heard other voices in your head? Tell me the truth." Siddhartha hung his head. "I thought as much. You have a feeling nature, a very deep one. You will sense things that other people can't. Unfortunately, not all those things will be good for you. There's nothing I can do about that, do you understand?"

"I don't want to be different, but you say I have to be. No, I don't understand."

Asita took a step toward him and laid a rough hand on his shoulder. "No mother, and a father you trust completely. We have to take that into account."

Siddhartha grew more uneasy. “I can hear the guards coming. You have to go. You said you shouldn’t be here.” Soldiers were shouting at each other from the far side of the pond, and the voices were getting closer.

The stranger shook his head. “I can take care of them.”

Whatever he meant was a mystery to Siddhartha, because Asita did nothing that he could see. Yet when three guards came combing the tall reeds, they didn’t see the two of them standing there in plain sight. The boy hesitated.

“It’s your choice,” said Asita calmly. “Call for them, or stay and listen to me.” Without a word, the boy waited until the guards were safely away. “Good,” Asita said. “I am only here to show you a few things. If I keep protecting you, you won’t find your own way, and you must do that.”

“How have you been protecting me? Are you the one who keeps me here, inside these walls?”

“No. I have been protecting you in many ways, but not physically.”

Asita bent down and looked the boy in the eye. “Your father wants to live through you. But he doesn’t have that right. Believe me.” Siddhartha looked away, biting his lip. “You are so young. I only wish—” Asita’s voice trailed off, and he stood up again. “No one’s fate was ever decided by talking. I have something to show you, and now it’s time.”

Overhanging the water was a large rose-apple tree in full bloom. “I told you that you have a gift, but it’s not a simple one. Already you have begun to experience it, but each time you do, you are tempted to run away. Does this tree remind you of anything?” Siddhartha shook his head.

“You were barely four years old. It was time for the spring plowing, and your father held a feast like this one. It was his role to go out into the fields and plow with the common farmers, a great sight. Everyone wanted to see it, including your nurses. So they left you under a rose-apple tree, just like this one. You don’t remember at all?”

Siddhartha didn't know what to say. A strange sense inside him, like a clearing mist, made him uncertain. Asita went on. "Nobody realized it, but you were watching closely, and as the plow blades turned the fresh earth over, you saw something very tiny but very disturbing. The bodies of insects and worms had been chopped into bits by the plow, along with other small newborn creatures. How did you feel?"

"I can't remember how a baby feels."

Asita's gaze didn't waver, and Siddhartha hung his head. It took a moment before he murmured, "I wanted to cry. Why should I cry over a half a worm?"

"You felt as if you had seen your own family hurt, and this frightened you, didn't it? No need to answer. We both know. The feeling was too big for you. But something else happened next—"

At that instant Siddhartha lost the sound of Asita's voice, because the clearing mist inside him revealed the scene the hermit was describing. Siddhartha saw himself in his baby's robes sitting under the tree. He saw himself look up at the overhanging blossoms, and suddenly he was back there again. But what he felt was no longer anguish at the small creatures cut to bits by the plow. Something new had washed over him. The beautiful tree, the immense blue sky, the inrush of the spirit of spring—they made him hurt again, but this time with a pang of pure joy. And yet somehow the two things were connected. The sight of violence, which hurt so much, transformed into a joy that wanted to burst out of his chest.

Siddhartha came back to himself, gazing at Asita, who seemed to be reading his thoughts. "That was your gift. You mustn't run away from it."

"Did I run away then?"

"No, you didn't have a conscience then." Asita said. "You didn't know enough to feel ashamed or different. You fell into that beautiful thing for hours, and when they found you, everyone was astonished that you hadn't moved from the same

spot all day. They were so astonished they didn't even notice something much more interesting."

Siddhartha held up his hand. "Don't say it."

"Ah. So someone did notice."

Although he had sat under the rose-apple tree all day, the tree's shadow hadn't moved. It stood in the same place overhead. And so the child was shielded against the sun's fierce heat until his nurses ran back again.

"Is that what you call protecting me?" asked Siddhartha, unsure whether to look upon this as a miracle or just one more thing that made him not like other children.

"You are troubled, and you shouldn't be. Come."

Asita sat down under the tree now. Siddhartha watched as the hermit crossed his legs and straightened himself until his spine was perfectly erect. From long practice he made this look effortless.

"Now, you try," Asita said.

The boy imitated the position, which felt strangely comfortable considering that he had never seen it before.

"Hands like this." Asita held one hand on each knee and circled his thumb and forefinger. Siddhartha followed and then closed his eyes after he saw the hermit close his. They were both quiet. At first the boy was only aware of his surroundings. The air was cooler under the tree; the noon sun filtered lazily through the still canopy of leaves and flowers. Siddhartha felt drowsy, and for a moment he might have nodded off. But he was awake when the voice in his head said, *Can you be still, without thinking? Don't talk to yourself. Just breathe gently.*

These words came into his head like his own thoughts, but he knew that they must be Asita's. The two of them seemed to be connected. Siddhartha accepted this fact without questioning it. The old hermit wasn't like anyone he had ever met. Certainly not like Canki, whom the boy vaguely feared.

Then Siddhartha caught himself. He wasn't supposed to think. After a moment his mind stilled. This happened naturally, like a breeze calming over a cool lake. He became aware of his breath going in and out in a soft rhythm. The whole thing was pleasant, soothing. He had the sense, almost physical, that he was sinking down into the earth or was being lowered into a well. Only his descent wasn't frightening and what waited below wasn't sheer blackness. It was more like a welcoming sleep, except that he remained awake in its arms.

Siddhartha lost track of time. Once he opened his eyes again, Asita was leaning on his staff watching him.

"They're coming for you," he said soberly. Siddhartha knew he meant the guards sent out by his father. "Can you remember what I've just showed you?"

Siddhartha nodded, although he wasn't really sure that he had been shown anything. Asita picked up his doubt.

"Here is your safety. This is going to be your special place. When you feel confused or when someone is trying to make you what you are not, come back to this tree. Sit and close your eyes. Wait for the silence. Do nothing to make it come to you. It will come of its own accord."

They could hear the return of soldiers shouting to each other by the pond. "Will I find you here?" asked Siddhartha.

Asita shook his head. "I had to think long and hard about even coming today. You are still in danger."

"From what?" Siddhartha's spirit was so settled that he was only mildly disturbed by Asita's veiled warning.

"From everyone who thinks they know what your future should be. You are not alone. They are always watching."

"I know." Siddhartha's voice was as sober as the hermit's.

"Well, let that be. I am withdrawing my protection now, as of this moment. I don't want to be like one of them."

Asita's voice had become tender and somewhat strange. Siddhartha didn't understand why the old man's gaze seemed

so sad, or why he took a moment to bend over and touch Siddhartha's feet. But the moment he did, the boy found himself closing his eyes again, and once more he descended into the well of silence, deeper this time, deep enough so that he didn't hear Asita depart.

“Hey, over here!”

The shout was close by, and Siddhartha heard running footsteps approaching. He slowly opened his eyes to see a ring of guards around him. Some looked agitated, others relieved. The officer among them gave an order: “Run and tell the king.” He knelt down beside Siddhartha. “Where have you been? Did someone take you away?”

Siddhartha shook his head. He wished they would all leave. It would be much better if they did, if he didn't have to return with them.

He wanted to close his eyes again, but instead he heard himself say, “I've just been here. Sitting by myself.”

The officer looked doubtful. “We've circled the place half a dozen times.”

If this was an implied question, Siddhartha didn't answer it. He was too aware that his body was getting to its feet, as if another person were in charge of his muscles. He himself was still inside the silence. More people were running up now, including various courtiers dressed for the feast, some wobbly from drink. What time was it? He was surprised to see the sun low on the horizon.

The soldiers led the way, and Siddhartha felt himself return to the world. Everything was back in focus. His father greeted him with open arms and not a word about whether he had fought with Devadatta. With the tension broken, the revels became twice as raucous, continuing long past midnight. Siddhartha was allowed to stay up. He spent a closely guarded hour watching the dancers and tumblers, then went to his room and threw himself into bed, exhausted but with a head full of images that kept him awake a long time.

ERASING A MEMORY isn't a simple process like erasing scribbles off a chalkboard. The eyes have the longest memory, followed by the nose. Who doesn't remember the blinding white snows of yesterday, the swooning scent of a rose, the brilliance of an unfurled peacock's tail? But try to imitate a robin's song, something you've heard a thousand times. Few people can. Still less can we remember anything told us that was wise. Siddhartha swore to himself that he would never forget Asita's words, but the years passed and the hermit's message became more and more vague. Besides, what are a few profound sentences compared to the thousands of days that follow? In the prince's case, each day was full to bursting, and by the time he was nearing adolescence, Siddhartha had forgotten that he had ever been under Asita's protection or that it had ever been withdrawn.

The king kept his word and allowed his son's education to be completely ruled by the high Brahmin. Canki's was the first face the prince saw when he stepped out of his room in the morning and the last when he returned at night. Naturally, this constant familiarity made him trust his teacher. The heavy hulk of a man treated him well and told him many useful things. It was rather like being followed around by a learned ox. But just as naturally, Siddhartha escaped his schooling whenever he got the chance. He had worn a path to the stables by the time he was six, and it deepened every year. There he could waste endless time with Channa, whether to lie in the straw and discuss the future, saddle a horse to ride (both boys together, one to hold the reins, the other to kick with his spurs), or groom a mount that was lathered up and quivering from a hard workout. Most of the time they practiced fighting, the one thing Channa never tired of.

If Bikram happened to be watching over them, then the boys' fighting followed strict rules. "We may have to kill, but we don't butcher. We fight with style," Bikram insisted. "Style is what makes the battling human." He only half believed this motto, but it gave him a sense of dignity, and when he couldn't

help but see the carnage of battles long past in his mind's eye, Bikram's only refuge was his dignity—he had killed too many enemies the dirty way.

Before being handed a sword, each boy had his chest wrapped in thick straw padding bound with burlap on the outside. Their blades, shorter and lighter than a warrior's, were dulled along the edge and the points shielded with a lead ball. These measures ensured that neither would get seriously hurt. "Don't dull 'em so much as they won't feel it," Bikram ordered the armorer. "Bruises but no blood."

As referee, he shouted, "Touch!" to make them part each time one sword made a hit. But there was only so much that could be done about Channa's fierce temper. The boy would keep whaling away even after his foe was hit, and then Bikram would jerk him back with a scolding oath and a cuff on the ear. They both knew he was secretly proud.

Often Siddhartha felt bad about besting his friend. But Channa had it coming. Each small victory he managed meant days of listening to him crow. Both of them bore colorful bruises from the blunted blades.

One day, when the boys had just turned fourteen together, it began as a typical match. Channa tirelessly lunged and slashed, which was his favored style. Siddhartha would watch and sidestep when he could, playing the sinuous panther to Channa's clumsy bull.

"Hit!" Channa cried out, but he was premature. He had only landed a glancing blow to Siddhartha's burlap tunic. The reckless thrust gave him too much momentum, and as he hurtled past, Siddhartha slapped him on the butt with the flat of his blade.

"I called a hit, didn't I?" Channa grumbled. Siddhartha just shrugged. Channa hated the grin on his friend's face, and rather than argue he risked a second lunge, which also missed. Siddhartha fisted Channa's shirt in his free hand, lifted his sword to his friend's throat, and drove him back against the

stable wall. Their breath hit each other's faces as they glared at each other.

Is this what my father takes such joy in? Siddhartha asked himself. He knew by the way he talked about war and being in battle how his father felt about the struggle to survive under bloody conditions.

There was no referee this day because Bikram had been called to the smithy to help hold an unruly warhorse that was being shod. The boys took advantage by fighting harder to test each other's limits.

Setting himself, feet apart and weight balanced as he'd been instructed, Siddhartha attacked with his blade. He had already learned that he had reach and height as his advantage. He'd grown to be the leaner and taller of the two. He struck quickly, getting as much brawn behind the blow as he could. Channa lifted his sword and blocked, steel ringing against steel. The harsh noise always made a few of the horses snort and stamp nervously in their stalls.

"Just say when you want me to stop playing around," Siddhartha taunted. They were both sweating heavily after an hour's practice. The swelling of muscles in their limbs was suggesting the contours of men, not boys.

"Playing around?" Channa said. "I'm getting sore from holding back so you can stay in the match."

Although his strength was flagging and air burned his lungs as he breathed, Siddhartha pursued Channa, driving his foe before him.

"Hit!"

This time it was Channa calling out that he had been struck with the point of Siddhartha's sword in the chest. The prince smiled grimly, shaking his head. *Let's have this one out,* the smile said. Seeing Channa stumble off balance, Siddhartha tossed his sword with a quick twist of the wrist and caught the hilt overhand, using it like a dagger to plunge into Channa's heart. He felt the fierce exultancy of his dominance, and in an

instant he was kneeling over Channa's body, the edge of his blade tight against his friend's throat.

He let Channa up, not looking into his eyes. If their gazes met, he knew Channa wouldn't be able to disguise a flicker of hatred, the despising look of the defeated. There was something else too. He thought he heard someone approaching all but silently. But before he could find out, Siddhartha felt his legs go out from under him. As he had turned away, Channa had stuck his boot out and tripped him. Siddhartha fell facedown on the stable floor, spitting out dung dust. The next thing he knew Channa had rolled him over and was shoving the point of his sword into Siddhartha's throat. Even shielded with lead, the tip dug painfully into his flesh.

"You forgot to finish me off," Channa said. He wore his usual gloating grin, the one reserved for when he recovered from the threat of defeat. But his eyes were dark with a feeling that left a cold spot in Siddhartha's heart

"See?" Channa said, leaning over him so their faces were only inches apart. "That's the difference between you and me, Siddharth'." He smiled confidently. "I'm not even thinking about not killing you."

"Did one of you girls talk about killing?" The two boys were startled. Without a sound Devadatta had appeared. "You'll never see the day, I promise." He drew closer, bestowing a pitying smile on them.

"Care to give it a try?" Channa blurted out impetuously. He raised his sword under Devadatta's chin.

Siddhartha stiffened. The three of them were constantly in each other's company. "Throw the three of them together," Canki had advised Suddhodana. "If we isolate the prince, he will sense that we have designs on him." It was another of the small irritants in their relationship that the Brahmin couldn't stop talking like a conspirator. "Why teach him to hate Sakya's enemies when we only have to put him in the same room with an enemy of his own?" The jealousy that Devadatta harbored toward his younger cousin was no secret.

“I don’t mind the boy and his cousin. They’re both royal,” Suddhodana conceded. “But why Channa?”

“We will give the prince someone he can trust and confide in. The day will come when you won’t be able to read his mind, and he will stop telling you what he really thinks. Then we can turn to Channa and find out everything.”

Secretly the king had doubts about this plan, but he had his own reasons for agreeing to the Brahmin’s suggestions. Devadatta would be able to report on the priest’s lessons in case they went too far in extolling the Brahmins at the expense of warriors. And Channa might serve as an informer in Siddhartha’s private life—Canki was right about that.

This arrangement at school sorely rankled Devadatta from the first. He, a Kshatriya, had never physically touched or shared food with anyone like Channa, a despised half-caste. This was the term for someone of unknown parentage, and it was true that Channa had never known his mother. Her name was never mentioned, nor did his father say why she had abandoned them. Bikram himself had been born in the stables he now managed. When Canki gathered his three pupils for lessons, Devadatta turned his back on Channa; there was never an occasion when he addressed him directly. For Channa to dare to pick a fight with him now was an outrage.

Devadatta considered what to do. The two obvious possibilities were to dismiss the taunt with cold silence or attack without warning. Inflicting a swiping cut with his dagger would do. But Devadatta was eighteen now, already a man. Men don’t respond to boys’ threats. The nicety of the question teased him, and he decided the one thing he couldn’t do was let the insult pass.

“What sort of test did you have in mind?” he asked. He spoke slowly, and as he did, he lifted up the point of Channa’s sword and unscrewed the lead ball. “We’ve had enough of pretending.”

Channa was brave, but he was also fourteen. He stared nervously at the naked point of his sword as Devadatta pulled

his own weapon from its scabbard.

“Up to you, boy,” Devadatta said. He watched Channa’s Adam’s apple tremble. They both knew that Devadatta could run him clean through without fear of reprisal.

But there was something else that no one but Devadatta knew. The fear he inspired did not come from his own menace. Siddhartha may have forgotten Asita, but his cousin had not forgotten Mara. He wasn’t allowed to. The demon fanned every ember of resentment in him until it glowed red hot. There was no mistaking the demonic element in Devadatta’s character. When he picked a fight, he could intuitively read his opponent’s weakness, and he gave no quarter once the clash began. Mara had also made him an extraordinary seducer. Devadatta moved in with unswerving confidence, capable of using honeyed flattery or the grossest suggestion, and he didn’t give up until the prize was won. His passions had drawn him into the lowest places—alleys and taverns where the pretensions of caste were thrown aside. However, it was not this that made him extraordinary in matters of lust. It was his complete ferocity toward any rival, even a husband, who stood in his way. Devadatta didn’t mind using a blade to persuade another man that his woman was free for the taking. There were rumors of clandestine murders that had resulted when the man put up too much resistance. Whether the rumors were true or not, more than a few villagers walked around with livid scars on their faces or across their chests.

“I don’t want to fight you. We were just practicing,” Channa mumbled.

“Not good enough. You challenged me. Now you have a choice. Apologize on your knees, or get ready to wake up dead tomorrow.” Devadatta smiled, but he wasn’t pressing the issue for his own amusement. He had a point to make about crossing lines that shouldn’t be crossed. If Channa had been able to see beyond Devadatta’s threats, he would have realized that his enemy wasn’t secure enough at court to actually kill Siddhartha’s best friend.

“Stop it!” Siddhartha stepped in between the two. He had hesitated for a moment, knowing that if he intervened, the fight would be deflected toward him. Channa would hotly deny that he was about to back down; Devadatta would curse Siddhartha for snatching away his prey. But that didn’t happen. Instead, both opponents shoved him aside with looks of hot rage.

“No, this has gone far enough.” Siddhartha stepped in again, and this time Devadatta screamed at him with pure malevolence, “Get out of the way!” But the hand that knocked him back with a stiff, clipped punch was Channa’s. The look in his friend’s eyes said, *Don’t you dare save me from this! I will never forgive you.*

Siddhartha was stunned. He couldn’t actually see Mara working inside his cousin, but he saw that Devadatta was not an arrogant aristocrat at all. He was a slave to his violent passions. And Channa was too. At that moment there was no difference between them.

They’re not even people. What’s happened to them?

Siddhartha asked this question, and his vision seemed to pierce the two. Their bodies became transparent, like the filmy membrane of a fish’s tail, but instead of seeing blood coursing through the membrane, Siddhartha saw lives. Each person was a package containing many lives, all crammed into the tiny space of a body. A wave of hostility surged from the darkest past of both fighters. Devadatta was only the carrier of this wave, its instrument, as infected people carry typhoid. But Channa? How could he be a carrier too?

Siddhartha did not reason any of this out. He felt it. Neither Devadatta nor Channa had looked his way. He drew his sword and leveled it between them. “Go ahead and fight,” he said, staring them both down. “But you will have to fight with my sword between you, and if you touch it, you have challenged me, and that’s the same as challenging the throne. Is that what you want?”

Neither knew if this was a ridiculous ploy or brilliant diplomacy. The two foes backed away, continuing their combat through hating looks. Devadatta sheathed his weapon, gave an arrogant bow, and left without a word. Channa ran away with a look of barely concealed contempt. The wind blew through the stable windows; gradually the air cleared. It was left to Siddhartha to wonder if his gift had visited him again. If it had, why should he take on the pain that others denied they even had?

I'm the one they're going to blame. I kept them from killing each other.

The deepest cut, the one that would not heal for years, was the contempt he'd seen in Channa's eyes. If he as much as Devadatta was a carrier of hatred, then there was no difference between them, and the distinction between friend and enemy was meaningless. Something between Siddhartha and Channa, the unspoken vow two boys take that nothing will ever step between them, at that moment started to die. There was no escaping it. Yet if Siddhartha could have found a way to erase just one memory, this would have been the one.

7

You just might do. In a pinch.”

“Just? Thank you very much.” The youth in the mirror smiled at being teased. At least Kumbira still thought of him as a child, if no one else did.

“From me, that’s saying a lot,” she replied.

Kumbira regarded Siddhartha with an appraising eye. His ceremonial dress fit perfectly. He stood in front of his reflection with a flutter of young ladies-in-waiting around him. On this day, when he turned eighteen, he would be acknowledged as the heir to old Suddhodana. He had begun the robing ritual bare-chested and bare-legged before all the layers of cloth, oils, and perfumes were piled on. Each of the women, Kumbira imagined, would have looked upon him with lust-filled eyes if they dared.

And why not? she asked herself. There must be taller and richer princes in the world, but not in their world. Still, she could see the boy in him. Much of Siddhartha’s innocence was yet his. Kumbira cherished that about him without being able to point it out to anyone. What his father wanted to instill was the opposite of innocence.

“Let me ask you something, Kumbira. How happy should I be right now? If anyone knows, it must be you.”

“Don’t talk nonsense!” Kumbira’s eyes narrowed, and she sniffed at him. “What am I smelling? He doesn’t smell right. More sandalwood!” Immediately one of the young attendants raced away to the royal store of unguents and spices.

“It doesn’t matter how I smell, Kumbira. I’m not dessert.”

“Don’t be so sure.”

The girls tittered, and she saw his brief smile fade as he regarded himself in the glass. The approaching day had seemed to dim any joy Siddhartha once found in it. Kumbira had caught him off guard at moments when sadness darkened his eyes and held his mouth tight and narrow. It nearly broke her heart to see him so withdrawn.

She approached from behind and laid a rich silk sash across his chest. “What’s the matter? Whisper in Kumbira’s ear. I’ll send your troubles to the gods, and they’ll never dare return.” Siddhartha shook his head. Kumbira sighed. “Are you determined to spoil everything? The rest of the palace and the people have been looking forward to this for a long time.” He didn’t answer.

“Young men, that’s what it is!” Kumbira snapped her fingers at the girl sitting at the toiletry table, her momentum stopped by the prince’s mood. “Rose water to sweeten the temper.” The girl grabbed the proper vial and hurried over to anoint Siddhartha’s flowing black hair, which curled at his neck. Kumbira tucked in a stray lock. Every detail had to be managed precisely. The king was introducing his heir to the world. As much as Kumbira feared royal wrath, she wanted this day for the prince as fervently as she would have wanted it for her own son.

Siddhartha pulled on the jewel-encrusted coat held out for him. He groaned and shifted under its weight. “Somebody must have made a mistake. This is meant for one of the elephants.”

A girl giggled, and Kumbira shot her a look. Even though he had been surrounded by women for two hours, something made Siddhartha’s head turn. He saw one of the youngest attendants try to cover her amusement by coughing and waving a hand in front of her face as if she were choking. Kumbira was poised to drive the girl from the room when she noticed something more unsettling than a breach of decorum: Siddhartha had evidently chosen that moment to discover how

beautiful the young girl was. His eyes widened, and he unconsciously assumed a bolder stance, like a peacock preening before a hen.

Kumbira was wise in such ways. She had witnessed the behavior of men for many years, and this reaction was unmistakable. She held her tongue and waited to see what would happen. Although aging, Prajapati kept a close eye on her charge, and everyone remarked, not with complete approval, on how chaste Siddhartha remained. Now Siddhartha's eyes were still caught by the young girl who had laughed at him. Sujata was young and soft, rounded in all the right places, with flowing hair and smooth skin. Even more attractive, though, was her discomfiture: she was blushing now at the prince's interest in her. That, Kumbira knew from experience, was a challenge no warrior could resist.

But instead of confronting the girl's behavior with the arrogance that highborn men often exhibited before a potential conquest, Siddhartha blushed as well. For an uneasy moment the silence between the two young people held sway in the dressing room. Hastily Kumbira stepped forward between them, breaking the eye contact. She started to wind a red turban around Siddhartha's head.

"Here," he said, taking the cloth from her hands. "You have to leave me something to do for myself." Expertly he wound the turban, but his eyes stayed on Sujata.

Where is she from? Kumbira couldn't recall. Country girls were regularly brought to court as servants, and this one was new. Kumbira had grown accustomed to such as her. The king constantly replenished the supply of fresh faces around the prince the way one would restock a trout stream.

"You're not here to gawk, girl," Kumbira warned, raking Sujata with a disapproving stare.

The girl dropped her gaze to the floor. "I wasn't, milady."

"Don't talk back. You have a lot to learn. Perhaps you should begin somewhere else." With a flurry of hands

Kumbira shooed her away. “Go, go!” Disconcerted, Sujata bowed and left the room.

“She could have stayed,” Siddhartha murmured. Kumbira said nothing. She wasn’t angry with the girl; she had only dismissed her to save the prince from being impulsive in front of tongues that would spread rumors throughout the palace. If he was seriously interested in Sujata, or even casually inclined, he could summon her in private.

Siddhartha sank back into a moody silence as the final touches were put on his costume, in the form of a peacock feather dashingly stuck in his turban and delicate white satin slippers on his feet. With a last frown at his reflection, he made for the door, then turned back.

“What’s her name?” His voice was almost too low to catch.

“Sujata,” said Kumbira. He repeated it under his breath. “So you noticed one,” Kumbira said. “Finally.” Despite the small feeling of apprehension that niggled at her, she couldn’t help teasing him. Siddhartha frowned, but he was too unsure of himself on these grounds to put much into the effort. He reached into his robe and pressed something into Kumbira’s palm, a heavy coin.

“Silence is golden,” he said with a shy, serious expression.

Kumbira nodded, and Siddhartha left noiselessly on slippered feet. They shared a small secret now, yet Kumbira felt inexplicably that he was drawing away from her permanently. There was no reason why this should be so, but she squeezed the gold coin in her hand like the memento of a lost cause. If only she understood the boy.

A PROWLING TIGER crouching in wait or an eagle in its aerie may find it simple to be alone, but humans don’t. We have many ways of being alone, and each has its peculiar complications. On the day that Siddhartha turned eighteen, three people felt completely alone in the palace. Siddhartha

was alone because he didn't know who he was and couldn't ask anyone. The king was alone because he feared that his project was about to fail. Devadatta was alone because he had been dragged down into private torment without hope of rescue. These three experienced very different forms of loneliness, yet they had one thing in common. They fought to make sure that no one else suspected.

Suddhodana stood on the ramparts watching the long train of litters, wagons, and carts bringing his guests and their retinues to the capital. From down below some had spotted him and waved or got down from their conveyances to bow in salutation. He stood still, not acknowledging their greetings. The weather was fine, the roads to Kapilavastu clear. He had sent out a band of troops to patrol the mountain passes where bandits lurked. In his mind this day was not a coming-of-age feast but a political event. There would be baked peacocks draped in their feathered skins as if still alive, saffron rice steamed with an equal weight of sesame seeds, whole kid goats roasted in butter, betel leaves wrapped in silver foil, honey wine to drink, rose conserve whose scent almost induced a swoon, barley beer in huge casks as the night worn on, and women's flesh offered in dark private alcoves for dessert. But all this richness was actually a show of force. His guests knew it. Most of them appeared on Suddhodana's orders, not by invitation. He was presented with the delicate task of transferring their fear and respect, which had been owed to him over many bloody years, to his son. The prospect filled him with gloom.

His eye shifted to the tower where Siddhartha was waiting before his official appearance. "I don't want you mingling. Don't greet anybody, don't let anyone see you. We want them to feel awe when they first set eyes on you. This is your stage, and you have to master it completely."

"I will do all you ask," Siddhartha replied.

"Stop it, I don't want words. What good have words ever done me? This is the first day of your future. Unless you fill

them with fear, these people will one day turn into your enemies, that I promise.”

“Fear?” Siddhartha considered the word as if it came from a foreign tongue. “I’m not a threat. Why not keep it that way?”

“Because fear is policy. It’s protection. People are either at your feet or at your throat. It’s up to you which one.” Suddhodana delivered these axioms with complete conviction.

“You protect me, and I’m not afraid of you,” Siddhartha reminded him. This was true. The distance between father and son had wavered over the years, sometimes reaching a pole of complete misunderstanding. But Siddhartha had never been afraid of his father or of what disobedience might bring out in him. As he had grown, the prince acquired a combination of qualities that baffled the king: mildness alongside courage, patience shored up by will, trust combined with sharpness of mind. Suddhodana could never predict which one would emerge. He was reminded every day that two different people seemed to live inside one skin.

“Hasn’t the Brahmin taught you anything?” the king burst out impatiently. “What I’m telling you is real, it’s true. Without creating fear, you can’t get respect. Without respect, you can’t have peace among potential enemies. Once it comes to bloodshed, nobody is afraid enough. Passion makes men fight to the death, and fear in battle is forgotten or despised. It’s useless once the swords are drawn. But fear will keep men from getting to bloodshed, if you manage it right.”

This wasn’t a studied speech, but it was no impulsive outburst, either. Suddhodana had planned to confront his son with the realities of a king’s existence. The time had to be ripe; the boy had to be old enough to accept the lesson but not so old that he would imagine himself wiser than his father. Suddhodana could only pray that his timing was right. He studied Siddhartha’s face for a reaction.

“How is fear managed?” asked Siddhartha. His hesitant tone wasn’t encouraging, but at least he had asked the right question.

“Fear should be applied like medicine,” his father replied. “Use just enough as a remedy but not so much that it becomes a poison. Medicine isn’t pleasant. But the pain it causes cures a greater pain.” Suddhodana had practiced this analogy until he thought it was easy to understand and forceful enough to be remembered.

“Fate has dealt us a fortunate hand,” Suddhodana went on. “We have the mountains to the north and west guarding our backs. I’ve fought on that front occasionally, but my eye keeps looking east. To the east you have strong kings, in Magadha and Kosala. Together they could overwhelm us by sheer numbers. They are almost strong enough to do it without allying. But they don’t attack because I inflicted pain on them first. I bit their throats like a small dog that can drive back a bigger one because it’s more fierce. The big dog will remember the bite and forget that its enemy is actually smaller.”

“You cast a spell,” Siddhartha said. It was a peculiar remark, and it stopped his father cold.

“More than a spell. I killed real men. One day you will too.”

There, I’ve said it. He had put before his son an inevitability, not simply a possibility. “A king has never existed who didn’t fight and kill,” he said with emphasis.

“So I’ll have to decide,” Siddhartha said. His thoughtful tone angered the king.

“No, there is nothing to decide. If you can’t get that into your head—” Suddhodana stopped himself. He remembered that he had the gods on his side. However confused the prince might be, he was still young, and his birth chart explicitly promised what lay ahead. There was no need to intimidate or goad him. Suddhodana changed tack. “I shouldn’t have said that. What I meant was, if you can’t do this for me, you are not the son I know you to be.”

Siddhartha had accepted this milder rebuke calmly. He parted respectfully from his father, each of them satisfied that he had been successful in disguising how alone and abandoned he actually felt. Now, as the king gazed gloomily toward the tower where Siddhartha was waiting, there was no return gaze. His son had flung himself on the floor, throwing off his suffocating robes and that absurd feathered turban. He buried his head in a pile of pillows, trying not to think of anything at all. His misery would have been simpler to bear if he had hated his father or wanted to thwart his will.

He had followed the dictates of his upbringing to the letter, had mastered the martial arts and excelled in mock battles. He had felt the exultation of downing an opponent on the field. So why did he feel like a coward, like someone who confidently marches to the edge of a cliff, only to find that he cannot take the last step? The last step was inevitable. Every day of his life had led to it. Siddhartha felt a sick dread in the pit of his stomach.

THE FEAST HAD GONE ON two full hours, the guests growing engorged and drunk as course followed course. Suddhodana alone drank nothing, and when he sensed that the time was right, he raised his goblet. “In my son’s name I have spent half of my treasury on this day.” He paused. “I have overseen every detail of your comfort and enjoyment. I personally examined every woman at court, and the ugly ones were banished to my friend Bimbisara’s kingdom—” A burst of appreciative laughter. Suddhodana waited for it to die away.

“—where they are considered the most beautiful women in the land.”

More laughter rose, this time raucous and mixed with applause. Even Bimbisara, the powerful ruler of Magadha, smiled and clapped, though his smile was tight and unpleasant to look on. He was one of the few guests who had come of his own accord, no doubt for concealed reasons.

When he was sure that the drunken guests were quiet and the astute ones were paying close attention, Suddhodana said, "I'm here to confess a precious secret, one that I have kept for half my reign." His voice rose dramatically. "Heed me, all of you!" He threw down his goblet with a clatter, ending the last few scattered conversations that had continued.

"After his beloved mother died, I summoned seers to Siddhartha's cradle. And they told me the most incredible news. About one who was destined to rule the world." Suddhodana paused and let the silence return. "This soul wasn't destined to rule a tiny kingdom. He was going to be given the world! Do you have any idea what that means?"

Suddhodana abandoned his throne and stepped down to his audience's level. The two chained leopards that flanked him followed behind until they reached the ends of their restraints and were jerked back. They growled, their tails twitching lazily.

"It means that it won't matter anymore that your lands are greater than mine," Suddhodana said, pointing to one of his peers, "or that your army is twice the size of mine," he pointed at another, "or that your father was a damned conniving murderer who tried to seize my father's throne."

The last man he pointed to recoiled. His hand dropped to the sword belted at his waist. For a moment he battled with his better judgment. Finally he broke eye contact and took his hand from his weapon. Suddhodana walked away, smiling in triumph. "Hate me all you want," he invited. "Plot all you dare." He turned back toward his throne. "My son will swallow all your kingdoms for supper. He'll buy and sell oceans, continents!"

The whispers of confusion and disquiet that trailed after Suddhodana subsided as his threats swept over the guests. Everyone was as superstitious of the gods as Suddhodana.

"Incredible?" he challenged. "No! I've seen it. I've seen all that will unfold."

At that moment a movement to the side caught his eye. Siddhartha was standing in the doorway, looking resplendent in his new bejeweled coat.

“Ah,” Suddhodana cried, gesturing toward his son, “here he is.” To himself he thought, *I’ve done all I can. Take the stage or pay the price.*

Siddhartha stared around him. Over the years he’d seen only a few of these faces. He took a step into the gathering. No one reached for his hand or made the slightest sound. He looked to his father for a sign and received an imperceptible nod. Siddhartha forced himself to go forward, wanting nothing more than to retreat to his room. His thoughts raced; they seemed deafeningly loud in the silence of the banquet tent.

“Come!”

His father called out for him, seeing that his son this time would not fail. Siddhartha began to notice those around him. The looks on some people’s faces seemed wary, but other faces were stark; they spoke of awe and dread.

What did he say to them?

Siddhartha knew that anything was possible. His father was a man of great words when he wanted to be. Suddhodana held out his hand. “Come, great king, come!”

Feeling strangely as if he were watching someone else’s body moving forward, Siddhartha felt his knees quiver, as if they would not hold. He took another step, and then another. When he was almost to his father, the king began clapping, slowly at first, then gaining speed. One or two guests joined in hesitantly, but Suddhodana didn’t stop, and others now joined in, putting more heart into their efforts. The clamor built. Thunderous noise washed over the feast, drowning out all other sounds.

When Siddhartha reached his father’s side, Suddhodana gathered him in a fierce embrace and held him tight. The king was beaming with triumph.

“You’ve won your future,” he whispered. “No one else could do it but you.” He brushed tears from his son’s cheeks.

Father, Siddhartha thought, what have you done?

IN THE TUMULT of cheering for Siddhartha, one man felt as much hatred as the king felt joy and pride. Devadatta bolted from the tent. His hands shook with the effort it took not to attack his cousin. For the first time in his life he realized how alone he was and how hopeless his situation.

The injustice of it was suffocating him. Hadn’t he been trapped at court for ten long years, presenting a thousand opportunities for the king to compare his weakling son to someone who took ambition seriously? Unable to restrain himself, Devadatta shouted, “Fools! Bastards!” But his imprecations were drowned in the clamor of the celebration.

He collided with two servants bearing trays of honey wine, figs, and pomegranates, knocking them and their load to the ground. They cried out, and Devadatta’s feet slid on a brown smear of fig pulp. He righted himself, barely noticing the havoc he’d created.

Both of them were idiots. The king and his make-believe warrior prince who would inherit the world. The prospect would have been sickening if it weren’t so absurd.

Someone else had a stake in the evening’s outcome. Mara had long ago invaded Devadatta’s mind, had colored his jaundiced perceptions and fueled his resentment. Only one thing was missing. The captive prince had never invited him in, had never consciously allied himself with darkness. That might change now. Mara had the advantage, as all demons do, of knowing just how fragile reality actually is, built by the invisible hands of imagination and belief.

As long as Mara was merely a phantom, Siddhartha could keep him suppressed with other figments of his darker imagining. Wisps of the mind, though toxic, are not mortal threats. Mara could not drive the boy insane; Siddhartha did

not harbor the necessary seeds of delusion. To destroy him, the demon needed a completely dedicated ally, a vehicle for evil who had no thought of his own soul. Such an ally would be recklessly evil, but in that he would not be unique. His uniqueness would lie in remaining unmoved by Siddhartha's compassion; he would hate it and want it destroyed. Would Devadatta give him that precious opening?

Watching Devadatta continue his enraged progress toward the royal apartments, Mara decided to precipitate a crisis. He couldn't use brute force, but an enticing accident opened another way. Devadatta happened to pass by the room where a certain girl waited. She was unsuspecting and vulnerable. To bring forth a demon in the flesh, nothing works better than flesh itself.

It was no trick at all to turn Devadatta's rage in the direction of lust. Mara wafted a faint perfume in his nostrils, planted an arousing image of swelling breasts, whispered in Devadatta's ear that he could not rest tonight until he forced his will on somebody whose pain would bring him pleasure. Mara pushed the small switches needed. Devadatta barely suspected that he was being manipulated. He only knew that he had to have a woman *now*. The insidious mechanism, so subtle in its creation, so violent in its outcome, was set.

SUJATA STARED WITH LONGING out the high open window, placed close enough to the banquet tent that she could hear music rise and fall on the evening breeze. By the light of torches she saw Siddhartha approach in his resplendent outfit, and her fraught emotions made her believe that she saw him shudder as he entered. Catching sight of him made *her* shudder. She couldn't completely understand what this meant. She was only fifteen, but that's old enough to understand many things. For instance, she understood that she must never tell anyone her real story.

Kumbira had gathered Sujata with the other unmarried young women to watch the spectacle from a distance. This

would be their sole participation until the secret hour when the men would be allowed near them.

“Here’s a cream to rub out dark spots and lime juice to tighten wrinkles,” Kumbira said, herding them around a table like an anxious madam whose girls must please if she wants to be paid. She had never seduced a man herself, but she was obsessed with the tricks of seduction. Buckets of snow bundled in straw had been fetched by runners from the mountains so the girls could dip their breasts in ice water to firm them up. “Those of you who are smart won’t eat tonight, but if you are starving, no onions and lots of sweet fennel seed.”

Only Sujata had held back, bored and detached from the excited preparations. She even considered paying a lower servant to sneak radishes and onions into her room since she didn’t want to attract any men that night. Any but one. Their toilette complete, the other ladies-in-waiting sat on pillows near the balcony, dreamily feeding their fantasies. They wore gauzy sleeping gowns. Bowls of food covered the low settees in the center of the room. A few woman nibbled and gossiped lazily.

Was I ever so young? Kumbira wondered. She eyed them with envy and dislike. Scraps of conversation floated past her like eiderdown. “Did you see what she was wearing? It might have looked good on her ten years ago.” “Do you suppose she knows?” “Knows? Her lover beats her and won’t give her money for a thing.” Kumbira couldn’t remember being like that, ever, but she must have been. And now she knew as much about the empire as the king himself, although it would be her head if she ever told anyone.

Kumbira watched the young girl sitting apart from the others. She ate from a bowl of grapes, one at a time. Since she had arrived, brought to court at night in a ramshackle wagon with torches on either side, then rushed into the women’s quarters without a proper introduction to anyone, Sujata had kept her own counsel. Kumbira hoped that the girl, whoever she was, had a strong sense of self-preservation. She must

realize the danger in luring the attentions of a prince like Siddhartha.

The door curtains suddenly exploded in billows of velvet, and through them burst Devadatta. It was too early, and Kumbira saw immediately that he was in a state.

“Hush!” she warned the girls, who had started squealing and drawing together like startled mice. Devadatta brought danger with him, not seduction. Kumbira strode forward, putting herself between the intruder and her charges. “You’re not allowed in here,” she snapped.

Devadatta scowled insolently. “I didn’t come for you, hag. I want one of *them*. That one.” He pointed to Sujata.

Kumbira’s first impulse was to let him take her. She couldn’t turn him away, not aroused and angry. If she summoned the guards, provided they weren’t too drunk to put up a fight, they couldn’t lay hands on someone protected by the king. Perhaps it would be better if Devadatta used her and Siddhartha found out about it. That course of action would nip the prince’s interest in the bud. The king wouldn’t appreciate complications.

But Sujata drew back, eyes wide with fright and her hand to her mouth. Her pulse beat rapidly in the hollow of her throat. Kumbira’s eyes weren’t so old that she couldn’t see that. She felt herself moved to protect the girl. And perhaps the prince as well.

Devadatta crossed the room. The other girls parted as if they were the wake left by his rage. He closed his fist on Sujata’s arm. Terrified, she tried to pull away. She dared not struggle because striking a member of the royal family would put her in peril. Her fear made Devadatta’s eyes glint. Even the small fight she put up brought a predator’s smile of anticipation to his lips.

“Young prince,” Kumbira said in a level tone that she hoped wouldn’t provoke him. “I appreciate your lust. But not this one.”

Devadatta glared at her. “Why not?”

Leaning close, Kumbira whispered, “It’s her day of the month.”

“You’re lying.” Devadatta studied Kumbira’s face suspiciously. It wasn’t in his nature to be blocked; there would be an outlet tonight, everything else be damned. “If she is untouchable, why is she here with clean women?”

But Kumbira had learned two generations ago to lie. She did it with a flat voice and no trace of defensiveness, maintaining eye contact. “She should be isolated, yes. But I’m old and softhearted, and this being a royal feast day—”

Devadatta cut her off. “Softhearted as a cobra, you old whore.”

Kumbira held his gaze, not giving him any indication that she disapproved of the way he treated her. She knew how to follow up a lie. Devadatta turned away and grabbed another girl. This one went willingly, even though he almost yanked her off her feet.

Sujata turned to Kumbira like someone in shock. Without warning, she fell against Kumbira’s breast, gripping her tight enough to hurt. “Thank you,” she whispered urgently. “Thank you a thousand times.”

The nakedness of the girl’s feelings moved Kumbira. In her long life of tough resilience and calculation, only Siddhartha had ever had such an effect on her. She almost wrapped the girl, who had broken down in tears, in her embrace.

Then she caught herself and realized what she was about to do—with all the others watching, girls who had no pity for Sujata and would be deriding her the moment they were alone. Grabbing Sujata by the shoulders, Kumbira pushed her away. “You think I did this for you?”

A confused look filled Sujata’s face. She wiped away her tears with the backs of her hands.

“What kind of nannies are they sending to court?” Kumbira demanded. She reached into her sari and took out the gold coin Siddhartha had given her. “You’re paid for,” Kumbira said brutally. “By the prince.”

“Oh.” Sujata’s voice was flat and weak.

“He’d never forgive me if I broke our bargain,” Kumbira added. “Not without consulting him first.”

The room was silent. The others knew they were witnessing a choice humiliation, fodder for backdoor gossips. Imperceptibly gaining control, Sujata drew herself up. “In two seconds you’ve been kind and cruel to me. What am I supposed to think?”

“Think yourself lucky,” Kumbira snapped. “Try that.” She turned her attention back to the others. “Now go back to your dinner, all of you. And don’t stink up your breath,” she warned.

Sujata remained standing there, her gaze locked on Kumbira.

Impudent girl, Kumbira thought. Still, she had some backbone, and the old woman wouldn’t want that to be totally crushed. “You’ve got breasts like a suckled sow. Go to your room and take some ice water to firm them up with. It’s going to be a long night.”

There was general tittering, and Sujata gasped in embarrassed hurt. She turned and fled the room. Kumbira didn’t watch her go. She had done Sujata a secret kindness by driving her away, and none of the others suspected it. Kumbira’s role wasn’t to bring Siddhartha and the girl together, but at least she could keep the greedy hands of other men off her.

Kumbira walked toward the window and wished she were watching Siddhartha in his glory. Cheers and applause rang once more from below. It must be past midnight. She smiled and thought of how proud the old king must be. And how drunk.

THE GREAT FEAST had wound down. The bulk of the guests had already retired or collapsed in a stupor. It was only a few hours before dawn. Siddhartha stepped over them and left the tent without his father noticing. The king sat in a heavy drowse, his head lolling on his chest. Siddhartha had made a show of drinking to every raucous toast but had actually sipped very little. He needed a clear head to make good his escape.

Tonight, after all the years of being kept like a nightingale in a gilded cage, he would be free. Excitement coursed through Siddhartha. He hurried back to his apartments and didn't bother lighting a candle. He'd lived all of his life inside these rooms and could make his way around them in the dark. Moving quickly, he packed a traveling sack, rolling a few clothes inside. He didn't know what to take or how much. He didn't want to be recognized as the king's son, so he packed rough breeches and shirts that he wore in the stables.

He slid his sword through his sash and secured it at his hip. All the travelers he'd talked to had agreed that the roads were dangerous. He'd share the common risk of being robbed, but if his identity were ever discovered, there would be the added one of kidnapping for ransom. He added some bread, dried fruit, and what few coins he possessed. Inside the palace walls he had never needed money; outside them he was genuinely poor. The coins came from Channa and various young nobles in games of chance or when he sold them trinkets he knew his father wouldn't miss.

Just as he was finishing, the ponderous closing of the main gates reverberated inside Siddhartha's room. He ran to the window and peered out. Moonlight burned cool against his bare skin. Below in the central courtyard the guards staggered to their posts, proving that the liquor had made its way to the barracks. The new arrivals shot the bolts on the gates; the noise was as loud as an ax splitting wood. Those portals had

stood against armies who had fought against his father, as witnessed by the hacked scars that decorated their exterior.

Siddhartha heaved the laden sack over his shoulder and fled, going quietly down the stairs. A throbbing drummed in his ears. Only a short distance on, he paused and heard muffled voices through the walls. It sounded like men arguing. Siddhartha shifted the sack's weight and pressed on. He kept his hand on his sword hilt so it wouldn't strike anything. Dark shadows filled the hallway; the torches in their sconces had long guttered out.

Then a sudden movement in the shadows sent him into hiding against the wall. Siddhartha went flat and stopped breathing. The cold stone wall leached the warmth from his body. He watched intently for a while before relaxing enough to start breathing again. But as he started forward, the shifting shape returned like a shadow puppet against a dark screen. This time he saw that it was a woman. She was slim hipped and moved quickly on light feet. Her face and glowing eyes were visible for a fleeting second in a bar of moonlight.

Sujata?

She paused as if she could hear him thinking her name. What was she doing here? Siddhartha started to softly call out, but before he could, she turned and ran down the hallway as if in a panic. Siddhartha's escape plan vanished from his thoughts. He let his sack slide from his shoulder to the floor and ran after her.

As he rounded the next corner he saw the figure—he was certain now it must be Sujata—disappear through a doorway. He followed her into the royal gardens, not daring to call out, knowing that amours were taking place in hidden nooks among the camellias and roses. The gardens had been designed by his mother. Maya had intended them to be a place of eternal fascination, and the centerpiece was an intricate knot, a maze crafted with topiary dragons and elephants, along with fabulous sea monsters like the magan and the mythical karaweik bird of hypnotic song. The sweet smell of night

blossoms thickened the air. Sujata paused at the entrance to the maze and looked back over her shoulder. Her expression was inscrutable.

“Wait!” Siddhartha raised his voice, more intent on the fleeing girl than on preserving his anonymity. He tried to use the tone of command that his father had mastered. Instead, Sujata vanished into the maze.

Siddhartha was helplessly drawn; he ran toward the entrance and ducked inside. The tall walls of the maze closed in around him, and the darkness became more complete. He ran, listening for her footsteps, shifting through twists and turns to follow the sounds she made. Then they stopped. If she had been as close as he thought, Siddhartha would have tripped over her by now. Footsteps sounded to his left, on the other side of the hedge wall. He tried to slip through the tangled growth, but the greenery was packed too tight.

“It’s me, Sujata. Stay where you are. You’re safe.”

Siddhartha put his hand on the left wall of the maze. It guided him back to the last turn, and this time he took the route he’d passed up before. At that moment the moon disappeared behind a cloud, and in the darkness he ran into somebody blocking the way.

“Sujata?” he whispered.

Her voice came back, and it was very close. “How fitting. You’re lost in the maze of your mind, and now you’re lost in this maze.”

Siddhartha was startled by Sujata’s arrogant tone, but it was definitely her voice. “I saw you running away. Are you in trouble?”

“I’m never in trouble. I make trouble.”

Sujata’s voice had deepened, and despite his attraction to her, Siddhartha instinctively took a step backward. His eyes had adjusted to the dark, and he perceived that the figure before him was not the curved, slim-hipped girl.

“Who are you?” Siddhartha’s hand went to the hilt of his sword, though he wondered how much use a weapon would be against a magician, if that was what he was confronting. Canki had told him that such beings existed and must be countered through ritual observances that made a person immune to spells and malevolent magic.

“I can be her if that makes you more comfortable. I can be whoever you imagine.” The shadowy figure stepped closer, and there was no doubt that its voice was now a man’s.

“Have you hurt her? Where is she?”

The stranger drew himself up; he smoothed his long-nailed fingers against the sides of his robe. “How do you know I’m not her? How do we know who anyone really is?”

“I’m going back.” Siddhartha made a move to leave, but the stranger’s voice spoke again with a peculiar allure.

“You think that if I take her shape she must be in danger? You could be right. The greatest danger she faces right now, however, is from you.”

Siddhartha’s temper flared. “Deceiver! Whoever you are, either fight me or leave me in peace.”

The stranger’s voice took on an aggrieved tone. “You mistake me, young sir. I’ve come to bring you peace, only peace. How can I convince you?”

The moon had come out again, and Siddhartha saw that he was confronting a tall young man, somewhat older than himself, who could have been his cousin, Devadatta. For a moment he almost called out Devadatta’s name, but he realized that this encounter couldn’t be anything but supernatural.

“Don’t you recognize me?” the tall young man said. “I’m the son your father always wanted, the one you could become.”

Darkness couldn’t conceal the truth of what the stranger said. Siddhartha was looking at himself a few years older.

“What is your purpose here? I am already the son my father wants.” Despite his attempt to sound confident, the stranger laughed at him.

“Your father wants a son who steals away in the night without a word? I’m surprised. He has worked so hard to keep you here. But I understand. Fathers don’t know everything. It’s right that they shouldn’t.” The stranger’s voice had a sinuous ability to shift between arrogance, familiarity, and cajolery. It stung and soothed at the same time. Siddhartha was feeling uncertain, and although the stranger made no threatening gestures, the mere sight of him drained Siddhartha’s body; he felt slack and weak.

“You won’t succeed, you know,” the stranger said. “At escaping, I mean. This is your rightful place. We just have to decide how you are to occupy it.”

The stranger was taunting him and making no effort to disguise it. “Tell me your name,” Siddhartha demanded.

“Siddhartha.”

“Then you are only a mocking demon, and I mistook you for someone of power.”

The stranger’s fingers curled like a cat deciding whether to use its claws or keep them retracted. “Don’t be rash. I’m here because I know you. Don’t act surprised, either. It’s time to be frank, isn’t it? A prince who is running away from a throne must be very confused, don’t you agree?”

Mara watched Siddhartha hesitate in his reply. His bantering with the youth had not been for his own amusement. It went deeper than that. The shapes he took, the words he spoke were all part of a test. He wanted to find the best way to penetrate Siddhartha’s mind, and so he circled it like a surgeon finding the exact place for the first cut.

“I didn’t tell you my name because I was a little offended,” said Mara. “You know me very well, and yet you offered no greeting. Is that any way to behave?”

Siddhartha shuddered slightly. He had never seen this shape before, but the voice in the darkness raised faint, troubled memories of a voice he had once heard in his head. Visions of his mother's lifeless body shrieked through his mind.

"See," Mara hissed. "He's starting to be convinced."

Then the demon's body jerked fitfully, twisting and bending in places where there were no joints. The tall young man became a floppy doll, which collapsed to the ground. Now its limbs folded into one another, turning into a crouched dwarf. Siddhartha froze in place, and the hummock became a formless mass that palpitated, waiting to take on whatever form his terror dictated. Whether from horror or a reserve of strength that he didn't know he possessed, Siddhartha's mind became silent, without thought.

"Nothing to say to me? Really?" Mara taunted. "After all we've been through." Now Siddhartha saw a funeral pyre, a skull crumbling to ashes. His nostrils were filled with the stench of death.

Mara was confident that these reminders would create a crack, that riding the crest of terror, he could penetrate Siddhartha's mind. It was important to Mara that he do this, because to bring down the prince by his own fear was far better than using a tool, even one as talented as Devadatta.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Siddhartha said quietly. It was a deceptive quiet because inside himself he felt a battle being fought on the edge of awareness. It wasn't a battle of words or images; everything proceeded silently, like a creeping epidemic or like foul, noxious air seeping through a cracked windowpane.

This was no stranger. Siddhartha had known all along who he was and that his name was Mara. He felt trapped and helpless. All his life he had endured the demon's attentions on the periphery of his mind.

"What do you want of me?"

Mara offered his hand. “I want to teach you. I want to help.” He smiled, but the taint of his intentions marred the effort. Siddhartha didn’t take the proffered hand. He sank on the ground, burying his face between his knees. If he was the special target of Mara’s intentions, there must be a reason. It could be great sin or great weakness on his part, but Siddhartha knew this wasn’t the case. It was nothing he had ever done that attracted the demon. Therefore, it had to be something he *might* do. The fact that he hadn’t defeated Mara in one night didn’t mean he would always fail.

Mara scowled, watching the motionless youth crouched before him. It was a delicate moment. He could feel the workings of Siddhartha’s mind; gradually the crack that Mara had found began to close up again. Siddhartha began to feel calmer. His mind had created a train of argument that he could believe in. He would vanquish the demon, not by resisting him but by finding a place that was already safe from him. Siddhartha didn’t know where that place was yet, but with an uncanny certainty he knew it existed. Siddhartha looked up, seeing the full moon overhead, and he realized that no one was looming over him anymore and no shadow appeared except the one cast by the high walls of the maze.

Mara, who had shed his mortal form, watched the prince leave without pursuing him. The demon felt that a great secret had been stripped from him, and by someone so guileless and young. Siddhartha had figured out that demons enter the mind when we resist them. The stronger our efforts to fortify ourselves against temptation, the stronger temptation has us in its grip. Mara sighed. But his confidence wasn’t shaken. He still had his allies. The coming battle would be interesting, which wasn’t often the case. He was irked, but he wouldn’t be defeated. Of that Mara could be certain.

8

The day after the banquet everyone's attention shifted to the king's entertainments and the part that his son, now elevated in the world's eyes, would play. No one saw the prince, however. The next morning Canki was summoned to Suddhodana's chambers, where he found father and son huddled together. Siddhartha looked away, lost in his own private world. Obviously his father had been hammering at him, with less and less effect.

"Tell him," Suddhodana commanded the moment Canki entered the room. "Put some sense in his head. He has to understand how serious this is."

"The prince knows his duties very well, Your Highness," Canki began.

Jumping to his feet Suddhodana erupted. "Stop it! I don't need a politician. The boy doesn't understand anything."

"What exactly is the matter?" Canki resorted to his most placating tone.

Suddhodana glared at him. "I've arranged mock combats for tomorrow. The army has been readied. I want *him*"—he pointed at his son—"to fight the way he's supposed to."

Canki turned to Siddhartha. "And you refused? I'm surprised."

Siddhartha kept silent. Canki already knew about the war games and the zeal that Suddhodana had put into them. The king didn't want to stop at creating awe among his guests. He wanted them to witness firsthand what would happen to

anyone who had secret hopes of defeating the son after the father was gone.

It was like going back to old times. The army had been roused from its long, lazy slumber. “Tell them they’re fighting for real,” Suddhodana had ordered. “Three gold pieces to the bloodiest warriors at the end of the day. Nothing impresses like blood.” Instead of dulling their swords and padding themselves with straw, his soldiers prepared to give and take real wounds. The only limit was that no blow should be deliberately fatal. “If you hit him and he doesn’t get up again, consider your enemy dead, for this one day only,” the generals instructed.

From the Shiva temple’s perch on the hill, Canki had looked over the plain stretched before the palace, filled day after day with military exercises. Suddhodana rode among his troops, nodding with approval the bloodier the games got. Behind him rode Siddhartha, looking pensive but raising no objections. Obviously, however, when the time came for him to lead the combat, he had balked.

Canki didn’t want to be caught between them, but he didn’t dare disobey the king. “Are you afraid to fight?” he asked Siddhartha. The prince shook his head but didn’t offer a word to defend himself.

“I’ve seen him with Channa. They go at it. No, it’s something else, something he won’t tell me,” Suddhodana grumbled.

Ignoring the presence of the priest, Siddhartha threw himself flat on the floor and seized his father’s feet. Suddhodana turned away, embarrassed by this show of humility, which to him expressed weakness. “For God’s sake, get up!”

“I won’t, not unless I can speak freely.”

Suddhodana’s eyes wandered the room in confusion. “Whatever you want. Just get up.”

But Siddhartha didn't. His face touching the stone floor, he said, "I have never been what you wanted, and the more you demand, the less I am."

"If you're not what I wanted, then what are you?" the king said, now more bewildered than angry.

"I don't know."

"Ridiculous! I know who you are. *He* knows who you are." Suddhodana looked at Canki, asking for support. The priest was at a loss. Canki was in service to a warrior king, but at heart he despised violence and had contempt for those who used it to get whatever they wanted. Kings were no better than murderers, the only difference being that they had a legal monopoly on killing. The Brahmin's way was one of guile, patience, persuasion. To him, those were marks of superiority.

After a moment, he knelt beside Siddhartha and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Do what is asked of you. If you go one step at a time, everything will come easier. This is only a shadow, a charade of war. How will you know about yourself until you try?"

Skillful as he imagined himself to be, Canki had no effect on the prince, who ignored him and kept his eyes fixed on his father. "I want to go away," he said.

A chill passed through Suddhodana's body, a cold premonition of failure. "No, that isn't possible," he said in a flat, toneless voice. "Ask me for anything else, but not that."

The sudden weakness in his father's voice stirred Siddhartha, and he got slowly to his feet. "What have I said that makes you so disturbed? If you love me, let me see what lies beyond these walls."

"You know nothing about my love," snapped Suddhodana. He gazed into his son's eyes, and what he saw there couldn't be answered. Turning abruptly, the king left the room, pausing a moment at the door to signal to the high Brahmin. "No more words. Leave him be."

CANKI SAT IN HIS STUDY, a plate of sesame rice uneaten by his side. His mind was filled with the troubles to come when the world discovered, as surely it would, the rift between king and prince. The Brahmin's thoughts were interrupted by a soft knock at his door. He had to conceal his surprise when it opened and Siddhartha, unannounced and alone, entered.

“Tell me about the gods,” he said.

Canki smiled easily. He pushed aside the plate of sesame rice, wondering inside if he shouldn't be worried. To side with the prince, or to even seem to, could soon be an act of treason.

“I attend to the gods,” said Canki. “You don't have to concern yourself with them.”

“But what do the gods want?” asked Siddhartha. “Why would they curse someone? Can a person sin and not know it?”

Canki cleared his throat to hide his momentary confusion. He had never known Siddhartha to confide in him, or to openly show anxiety. The youth was guarded, as princes should be. The priest decided not to ask why the sudden interest in curses.

“You want to know how to get into favor with the gods?” he said. “And so you should. It's commendable.” Siddhartha, for the first time, placed himself at the priest's feet, in the classic pose of a disciple asking his master for wisdom.

“The gods allow great suffering—wars, famine, crime, and immorality—because the people have forgotten how to please them,” Canki said. “Since no one can be perfectly good, there is much sin in the world. Rituals and sacrifices honor the gods and erase that sin.”

“But everyone honors the gods, and not everyone is happy,” Siddhartha pointed out. “Why does misfortune visit us?”

Canki waved his hands, pointing to piles of scriptures written on dried palm leaves and vellum, hundreds of scrolls lining the shelves of his cramped, airless study. “Every sin is a karma, and every karma has a precise remedy. It takes years to delve deep enough. You study and try to understand every detail. The invisible world is complex. The gods are fickle. Even then you may fail.”

“Have you ever failed?”

Canki was taken aback. “Brahmins cannot fail. Every word in the scriptures was delivered to a Brahmin.”

“And no one else? The gods have to find a priest or they don’t talk?”

Canki had a ready answer. It was his job to know all the answers, but he hesitated, his mind searching for a solution. Despite all the king’s efforts, his son was turning the other way. His deeper nature hadn’t been diverted. Canki wasn’t alarmed, however. Now he had a chance to influence Siddhartha, and it might be his last. He looked at the youth sitting at his feet and decided that the canniest course, for once, was to tell the truth. He said, “You are among the few who can understand. I’ve always sensed that, ever since you were a little child.”

He leaned closer and put his hand on Siddhartha’s shoulder. He had no real affection for his pupil, but experience told him that physical contact was a more powerful bond than words. “I want to tell you about the Golden Age.” He ignored Siddhartha’s puzzled look, pressing his fingers into the youth’s flesh. “Just listen. There was an age, long, long ago, when the world was perfect. The scriptures tell us that no one had to struggle. There was no evil or wrongdoing. Abundance was the only life that people knew. But then decay gradually set in. This perfect world was only possible because the gods kept the demons at bay, unable to touch human beings and create mischief. Would you wish to bring back such an age?”

Siddhartha started. “Me?”

“It was prophesied when you were born that you could be the king of a new Golden Age. Your father knows this. Why else would he protect you so strongly, covet your safety above everything else?”

Siddhartha was hanging onto the Brahmin’s words now, and Canki smiled knowingly to himself. The prince was listening so eagerly because he felt guilty. He thought he had committed some obscure sin, which was being punished by his imprisonment in the palace.

“Your father loves you, but he’s also in awe of you. If he ruins the chance to bring back the Golden Age, how much guilt will he carry for the next hundred lifetimes?”

Siddhartha considered this seriously. “So he’s not disappointed in me?”

“On the contrary, the failure he’s anxious about is his own. You must prove to him that he has raised you as the gods and the stars prophesied. If you can do that, you will both be favored for the rest of your lives. If not—” Canki held his breath for a reaction. He had his private doubts about the destiny that awaited Siddhartha. There had been little evidence so far of a great warrior or a great saint in him.

“Tell me about demons,” said Siddhartha abruptly.

Now it was Canki’s turn to be startled. *Demons?* The Brahmin almost replied, “Have you met a demon?” Then Canki caught himself and realized that bluntness wouldn’t work, not with a withdrawn youth just coming out of his shell.

“Don’t worry about demons; they are indestructible and beyond your reach to defeat them. Worry about men who have taken evil to heart. There will be no Golden Age until they are defeated,” said Canki. “You may find it impossible to believe that this all depends on you, but I am willing to risk that you can accept the truth.”

Siddhartha stood up, his demeanor more serious. Canki could see that his words had sunk in. He had dangled a

mystery before the youth, and few can resist a mystery, particularly one that features themselves at the very center.

SUDDHODANA HAD SULKED in his room, at first furious with his son, then gradually sinking into moroseness. To face rebellion from the prince just at the moment of victory was too galling to endure. Then moroseness changed to grief. Suddhodana was certain that he had lost his son.

That night the king awoke with a start. A shadowy figure had entered his rooms. Suddhodana fumbled for the table by his bed, reaching for a bell to summon the guards.

“Don’t be afraid, father.” Siddhartha’s voice was soft in the darkness. “I will fight.”

CANKI SAT IN THE GRANDSTANDS with the dignitaries, fanned by slaves waving palm leaves over their heads and charmed by veiled girls passing sweetmeats. He assumed that his talk with Siddhartha had turned the tide. But still there was danger. The prince had come around, but for how long? He was erratic, unpredictable.

The Brahmin remembered the king’s threat from years ago: *Just live long enough to see what I’ll do to you if this plan fails.*

As a public show of force, the mock battles were a success. The sheer bulk of Suddhodana’s army, and the ferocity of his fighters, impressed the neighboring rulers and depressed their generals. There was a ripple of shock when one of the archers mounted on horseback was killed, but Canki had wandered away by then and witnessed nothing, not even the ladies-in-waiting who fainted and had to be carried from the scene.

By leaving early, Canki had missed the one part of the combats that in the end really mattered.

Siddhartha’s surrender to his father’s will was not a sham. He dressed himself early that morning in his armor, dismissing

his father's grooms because he was ashamed to be seen donning so much padding and protection; he was the one fighter who couldn't risk being bloodied.

"Not that anyone is going to get near you, much less fight."

Siddhartha wheeled around. Devadatta had come in, not bothering to knock. He smiled maliciously. "They've got you pretty packed in. Why bother? You could go out there buck naked and nobody would so much as scratch you. Unless they want to be dragged out of bed tomorrow morning to kiss the chopping block."

Siddhartha clenched his jaw. "They have to fight me if I start it first. I'm not going out there just to watch."

"Of course you're not." Recently Devadatta had become more brazen in his contempt. He bent over and occupied himself with the intricate thong laces of his leggings.

"You can challenge me if you want," Siddhartha said quietly.

Devadatta burst out laughing. "You can't be serious."

"Why not?" Siddhartha stood up and faced his cousin squarely. The two were almost matched in height and strength by now despite the four years separating them. But Siddhartha knew he had one great advantage: Devadatta was so arrogant that he rarely practiced. He may have lost his fighting edge without knowing it or being able to admit it to himself.

"What weapon?" Devadatta looked intrigued now.

"Sword and dagger." Finished with his equipage, Siddhartha rested his helmet in the crook of his arm. "They're expecting me."

"Naturally. The carnival goes on."

The two cousins exchanged nods in mock courtesy, and Siddhartha left. When he got to the stables he found Channa holding the reins of his favorite white stallion. The horse had come to the king from the wilds, and at first nobody could

tame him. But Siddhartha spotted the animal's fear and used it. Every time he brought a stick of sugar cane for the stallion, he would sit and wait as long as it took for the horse to walk over to him. He never approached on his own, even if it took an hour for the animal to calm down.

When he was tempted enough, the horse wanted to snatch the treat and run off, but Siddhartha made sure that his hand always touched the horse before he released the food. Gradually the white stallion began to accept being touched as part of being rewarded, until the day came when Siddhartha approached him in public and put a bridle on him, a feat nobody else had accomplished. From that point on it was only a matter of time before word went about that the prince had tamed an untamable wild stallion. On the day when the horse allowed himself to be mounted, Siddhartha named him Kanthaka.

Channa looked restless and disgruntled. "I hope you're not too bulky in all that gear. You need to ride properly, remember that," he grumbled.

"Don't worry." Siddhartha knew that Channa's resentment wasn't personal. Despite Channa's hours of military training beside Siddhartha, he was technically still a stable boy and not a fighter.

Channa said, "I assumed you wanted this one. The king isn't risking his best horses, but he didn't exactly say you couldn't. He'll carry you better than any of the others." Channa fixed his expert eye on the stallion's high shoulders and wide girth. Siddhartha nodded, stroking Kanthaka's flanks. The animal wanted his touch, and although Kanthaka had quivered nervously at all the neighing and galloping going on around the stables that morning, he calmed down and waited.

Channa managed to crack a smile. "I also assume you know that someone's staring at you. It's a mistake, I'm sure. She thinks you're me."

A girl had escaped notice following Siddhartha to the stables. Channa didn't know who she was, but as soon as he turned his head Siddhartha recognized Sujata. She stood shyly in the shadows of a large tree, but the moment their eyes met, she let the blue silk that half-covered her face drop. Siddhartha was at a loss. "What's she doing here?" he mumbled.

"I don't know. I guess she couldn't help herself." Channa laughed and gave Siddhartha a hit on the shoulder. "You've still got a little time. Go on."

"It's not what you think."

"It doesn't matter what I think. Go ahead." Channa was smirking now, and as happens between two young males who talk about everything except *that*, his look said, *You don't know all about women yet? You'd better believe I do.* They were both fairly sure that the other was still a virgin, but Siddhartha nursed a suspicion that Channa had more opportunities than he did belowstairs in the kitchen and scullery, while Channa suspected that Siddhartha had more chances than he did in the pleasure pavilion by the lotus pond. This unspoken doubt created a secret between them when there was no secret to begin with. Neither one dared to find out that the other knew almost nothing about women.

"Let her come to me if she wants to," Siddhartha declared. He hoped he could save face and at the same time not risk approaching Sujata—not now, with someone watching. Luckily, he didn't have to. She took a deep breath and came to him. Throwing aside the daintiness of court women who acted as if a stable was unholy ground, Sujata walked up to them with her eyes fixed on Siddhartha.

"I came to wish you well. Please be safe today," she said, her words coming out a bit too fast and too loud, as words do when they are practiced in advance.

Siddhartha cursed himself inside, knowing that Channa could see him blush. All he needed to say was "Thank you," but confusion made him stammer, "Why would you think I'm not safe?" His tone was brusque, and Sujata turned a deep

scarlet. Humiliation took her breath away, and Siddhartha died inside that he was the cause. “I mean—” he said, and stopped. Nobody knew what he meant, least of all himself.

It’s unclear whether Channa chose that moment for his first attack of chivalry, but he coughed and muttered, “I have to find a new bridle. This one’s too loose.” Then he was gone, and the two were left alone together. Embarrassment momentarily blinded Siddhartha, but as his sight cleared the first thing he became aware of was Sujata’s beauty. It had been enough to make him notice her, then to chase her through the maze. A cloud passed over him with that memory. He took a step back.

Sujata had been looking for the slightest sign of approval, and this step crushed her hopes. “I shouldn’t have come. If you can forgive me—”

“There’s nothing to forgive. There could never be anything to forgive.” Siddhartha had no idea why he blurted out those last words. But now that they were out, he took the plunge. “I’ve wanted to see you for a long time. I didn’t know if it was right or not. But I’m glad you came today, very glad.”

Although Sujata maintained her shy posture, head ducked down between fallen shoulders, she was thrilled. Something had kept her awake at night. She had decided to trust this something, and now Siddhartha was smiling at her. She became painfully aware of his lean, muscular body, disguised though it was under his armor. There are dams that crack and dams that break open without warning. Hers was the second kind. “I think about you all the time. I’ve come to your room at night, but then I run away. What can I do? This is too impossible. We can’t be together, but I think about you all the time. Oh, I already said that. You must think I’m stupid.”

“No, not at all.” Siddhartha in fact was delighted with everything Sujata blurted out. When babble is like music, love can’t be far away. He wanted to throw off his armor and embrace her, because he was as aware of her pale breasts and the soft flow of her hips as she was of him. Siddhartha had

never heard of skin hunger, but he felt it now as strongly as he had ever felt anything. Instinctively his hand moved around to the side of his chest plate, fumbling for the leather ties. “Why can’t we be together? My father doesn’t have to know.”

“Oh.” A shadow suddenly darkened Sujata’s face. Siddhartha seemed so eager, yet he was thinking about his father and the disapproval that would fall on them if anyone thought she loved a prince. Which meant that Siddhartha was aware, even at that moment, of the huge difference between them. “I can’t stay,” she murmured. She could already feel the sting of contempt that the court would direct at her. And then there was her secret, the thing nobody suspected.

Siddhartha grabbed Sujata’s arm before she could turn away. “What’s wrong? You look like you’re going to faint. What did I say?”

“The king.” With that, Sujata burst into tears and ran away. Siddhartha was confused and hurt, but at that moment Channa returned holding a new bridle. “Do you want this?” he asked.

“Of course not. You know as well as I do.” Instead of thanking Channa for his discretion, Siddhartha sounded angry. He had made some kind of unwitting, disastrous blunder with Sujata, but there was no time to run after her. “Help me up,” he said curtly.

Without a word Channa bent down and made a step with his two hands so that Siddhartha could mount Kanthaka with his full weight of armor. The layers of ox-hide padding creaked as he settled into the saddle. Siddhartha galloped off toward the field, not waiting for the equerries who were supposed to surround him in procession. His mind was preoccupied with the image of Sujata’s pained expression and the guilt of knowing that he had caused it. However long he was lost in this mood, he suddenly became aware of his surroundings. People were gathered on either side of the tournament field, the nobles seated in a grandstand, the common people standing or sitting on the ground on the opposite side, unprotected from the sun. A cheer went up

when the crowd caught sight of the prince; he automatically went through the motions of a well-rehearsed scenario.

The king was waiting impatiently for his son's arrival. The day had turned hot, the sun a fierce white disc burning in the sky. He rose to his feet as Siddhartha approached, and he had to admit to himself that the crown prince made a fine show on the white stallion. If only he kept his nerve and did what was necessary.

Siddhartha bowed. "I dedicate my victories to Your Highness and pledge that every glory in war, however many battles I am privileged to fight, will be for you and your kingdom."

Suddhodana returned a gracious smile and waved Siddhartha off toward the field of combat. He had written the speech himself, but the boy could have spoken it louder, and he had forgotten to rise up in his stirrups and swivel around to catch the eye of every noble spectator. *No matter*, Suddhodana thought, driving from his mind the fear that Siddhartha might fail him.

To his relief, everything went as planned. Blood was soon drawn in the hand-to-hand combats, just enough to whet the spectators' appetites. He had ordered that dangerous weapons could be used, the kind rarely used in mock battle. There was a knife-edged discus that could be thrown hard enough to decapitate an enemy, a lash with multiple barbs at the end that tore off any flesh it made contact with, a heavy two-sided ax capable of piercing any armor, even bronze, a nailed mace, and a rippled dagger that ripped muscles apart both as it went in and as it was pulled out. His soldiers wouldn't have thrown themselves into using these weapons of horror, but Suddhodana had made sure they were tempted with huge rewards, and in addition their food supply was allowed to dwindle so that every rice larder and meat chest was empty that morning, just in case they forgot who sustained them.

With these incentives, his men fought hard, and it was lucky, despite many gruesome wounds, that nobody was

killed. Nobody, that is, until the time came for mounted archery. This was the most spectacular of the combats. Siddhartha had participated vigorously in sword fighting but had otherwise remained on the periphery. Now it was his turn to show his true mettle. On one side of the field nine archers were lined up on horseback. Siddhartha faced them alone on Kanthaka. One by one the archers would peel off and charge at Siddhartha, firing arrows as rapidly as they could. Siddhartha's goal was to knock each opponent off his horse while escaping the arrows.

The crowd grew hushed. This was a test of skill no pampered son of a king could pass unless he was born to fight, and although the arrows had been blunted enough not to pierce the prince's armor, he couldn't be totally protected. The spectators gasped when Siddhartha, in a show of bravado, took off his helmet and threw it to the ground. The crowd applauded, but then he went further and unstrapped his broad chest plate, letting it fall away. Everyone went into shock, including the king. Suddhodana leaped to his feet, ready to call a halt to the games, but he knew he couldn't. The humiliation would wipe out everything he had tried to achieve for the past week. Was Siddhartha desperate to show his worthiness? Whatever his motive, Suddhodana recognized the necessity of what his son had done: mock battles could only frighten people so far and no farther unless lethal danger was involved.

The first archer peeled off and rode at a hard gallop toward Siddhartha, who kicked Kanthaka in the side and charged to meet him. Both men shot their first arrow at the same time. The one aimed at Siddhartha grazed his leggings, while his arrow flew true—the horseman was hit in the middle of his chest and fell from the saddle. At that moment the second archer peeled off, raising his bow. Siddhartha quickly found a new arrow from the quiver over his shoulder and prepared to fire again.

In his mind he was clear why he had removed his helmet and chest plate. Only by exposing himself to real threat could Siddhartha feel he wasn't participating in a charade. If he was

ever to be a real warrior, it must begin today. He fired, and again his arrow found its mark; the second archer toppled to the ground with a blow to the chest. Siddhartha wheeled Kanthaka around. The stallion wasn't panting yet, but there were seven more to go.

"Come at me harder!" he shouted across the field. "Anyone who draws my blood will be forgiven by the king, if he fights fair." This was a lie, but Siddhartha had seen the nervous glances being exchanged by the archers when he threw off his armor. Goaded on now, his adversaries wanted to prove to the king that they were the best. The next two men charged faster and aimed better. But Siddhartha had taken his training seriously, and he had talent on horseback. When his next arrow missed, he kept his cool and fired again, unhorsing his opponent when they were within a few yards of each other. The crowd grew more impressed, and by the time Siddhartha was down to the last two archers, they were on their feet cheering in earnest.

Kanthaka's sides were heaving now, and Siddhartha felt a little giddy. He had eaten nothing that morning, and the constant wheeling and maneuvering were making his surroundings whirl. He braced himself because the end of the combat was the toughest part. The last two archers charged him together. Siddhartha had an arrow ready, but his nerves got the better of him and it flew well right of the man he aimed at. His hand fumbled for another arrow.

The bolder of the archers had already gotten off two shots, and the second one was lucky—it found a gap in the padded blankets that protected Kanthaka's front, deeply piercing the horse's skin. Siddhartha felt the animal rear and barely kept his seat. He pulled tight on the reins and closed his thighs around the animal, willing it to calm down and forget its fear. Kanthaka held on, galloping straight for the double enemy, who now closed in, one on each side.

They were too close for Siddhartha to get any arrows off. He heard a cacophony of hoofbeats against the packed earth, and his eyes blurred. He shook his head, and he saw Mara

riding behind one of the archers, clutching his arms around the rider's waist. The demon was laughing, and then he suddenly disappeared. Siddhartha didn't have much time to refocus his sight. He ducked down close to his saddle as the two enemies whipped past him on either side. They fired, and Siddhartha was fortunate. The arrows flew over his body with a swish of air, missing him.

He wheeled around, and regaining his self-possession, he fired rapidly, first at the back of one horseman, then at the other. His timing was perfect. They were still struggling to turn their mounts around when his arrows hit them, and both men fell. Siddhartha had fired so rapidly that they seemed to go down simultaneously. The crowd roared. For the first time in his life Siddhartha felt exulted by battle; he rose in his stirrups and acknowledged the accolades. This was something, the first thing, he had earned for himself.

But despite his triumph, Mara's laughter rang in his ears. Siddhartha was disoriented, and he scanned the tournament field. Only one of the archers had gotten to his feet. The other lay on the ground writhing in agony. Siddhartha jumped down and ran over to him. He saw with horror that the man had been hit in the throat, the arrow's point coming out the back of his neck.

Arms lifted the wounded man to a sitting position, hands tried to dislodge the arrow. He groaned and almost passed out. Siddhartha's head swam in the confusion. He was dimly aware that someone broke off the arrow's tip so that the shaft could be pulled through the man's neck, but this caused a tremendous gush of blood, which shot so far that it hit Siddhartha in the chest.

"Do something," he pleaded, aware in the midst of everything that his voice sounded high and panicky, more a boy's voice than a man's. He looked up to see that the king had arrived. The soldiers parted for him. His father barked for someone to fetch a physician, but by that time the wounded man had lost consciousness, his head limply tilted to one side like a broken doll's. From the fountain of blood still erupting,

but with weaker and weaker force, it was obvious he was lost. Suddhodana pulled out a silk kerchief and pressed it to the man's wound.

“Did you know him?” asked Siddhartha, although he had no idea why that would matter. His father grimly shook his head. The presence of death quieted the bystanders, until a new voice broke the silence.

“Amazing. Someone was actually hurt. Fire the stagemaster.”

Devadatta pushed his way through the packed bodies surrounding the corpse. He stared at it coldly. “It's his own fault for missing his cue, isn't it?” He turned to Siddhartha, whose whole body was shaking. “You couldn't have fought for real, I can see that.”

The bystanders were shocked, waiting for the king to explode with rage, but Suddhodana kept silent. His guilt told him that Devadatta was right—nobody was meant to get hurt when the prince was involved. He gazed at his son, and Siddhartha instantly read the truth.

Siddhartha willed himself to stop shaking and got to his feet. He drew his sword, glaring at Devadatta. “You said you wanted to fight me today. I accept your challenge.”

“No!”

For a moment it sounded as if his father had shouted, but Channa stepped through the crowd. “No, I'll fight the bastard. It's about time.” Channa took two strides, raising his fist to take a swing at Devadatta. But in his wildness he lost his balance, and the blow only grazed Devadatta's cheek.

Devadatta spit on his palm and wiped his cheek with a look of disgust, as if it were covered with excrement.

“I beg my rights, Your Highness.” Devadatta dropped to one knee in front of Suddhodana. “This low-caste scum touched me. You all saw it. I beg my rights.” The crowd stirred and became uneasy as the king remained immobile and silent for several seconds.

“The king acknowledges Devadatta’s rights.” Suddhodana finally spoke but not with his usual force. “He can decide the fate of any low-caste who has defiled him.”

Devadatta smiled. “Death,” he said.

Suddhodana scowled. “Think carefully. It was just a touch, young prince. Let me remind you, this is a cause for justice.”

“I’m only looking for justice. This scum intended to catch me off guard, knock me over, and then stab me. See, his weapon.”

By now two guards had grabbed Channa and wrestled the dagger from him. Pushed to his knees, Channa shouted, “If that’s what I was going to do, let me finish it!”

Devadatta shrugged and held his open hands out to the king. “My case is proved. Let me have my rights, as you promised.”

“No, let me have mine.”

Without warning Siddhartha was kneeling at the king’s feet beside his cousin, his voice on the edge of rage. “I have the right to fight in place of my brother, and Channa is my brother in everything but name. Everyone knows it, so why pretend? If any man of caste dares to defame Channa, I will fight that man, whoever he is.”

This was the moment that Canki shouldn’t have missed by leaving early. As high Brahmin, he had full authority, over even a king, to decide disputes of caste. These were many and complicated. Scriptures held, for example, that if the shadow of an untouchable fell across the path of a Brahmin, unclean contact had taken place and the Brahmin must return home to bathe. Food touched by someone of low caste could not be eaten by someone of high caste. This was clear enough, but what if the high-caste person was dying and the food was needed to save his life? Canki held court over these bewildering issues. But he had left the scene.

“Get up, both of you,” Suddhodana ordered. With disgust he knew that Devadatta had more right on his side than the

prince. Often in the heat of battle a low-caste's weapon had accidentally nicked a high-caste comrade's, drawing barely a few drops of blood. But this was enough to condemn the offender to death if the high-caste soldier demanded it. Channa clearly intended to draw blood; the waters weren't muddied until Siddhartha foolishly intruded. Suddhodana now had no choice.

"The two princes both have right on their side," he announced. "I will betray justice if I decide against either of them, so let Nature be the judge. The two princes will fight."

No one expected this judgment, but the first to recover from the general consternation was Devadatta, who gave a wolfish grin. Between arrogance and despair at his situation, he knew he had no future, not one befitting his worth. His fatalistic streak would be satisfied if he managed to kill this despised cousin who had led to his own imprisonment, or else got killed trying. "Sword and dagger," he said.

Siddhartha nodded grimly. Already free of helmet and chest plate, he began to strip off the rest of his armor for better mobility. But more than that, he wanted the fight to be decisive. The truth was that each of them—Siddhartha, his father, and Devadatta—was trapped by the others. Astonishingly, all three had come to this realization at the same exact moment, a moment from which there was no turning back.

9

The sky was divided between sun and clouds as the fighters circled each other. They had stripped down to cotton pants, their chest and feet bare. Siddhartha kept his eyes fixed on Devadatta's, because as tempting as it was to watch his opponent's hands, he knew that Devadatta's glance would give away his intentions.

Siddhartha felt he was moving in a dream. A part of his mind floated high above, looking down in wonder that a fight to the death ensued. But Siddhartha's instincts for survival were strong. He shook himself and made the opening lunge, his sword hand ahead of his dagger so that by warding off the first blade, Devadatta might open himself to the second one. Devadatta was agile and ready—he jumped to the side with a shouted “Ha!” and slashed with his own sword. Siddhartha went by too fast and wasn't hit.

Devadatta began a relentless round of parry and thrust, making Siddhartha counter blow after blow with his sword. Each time metal clanged on metal, a shock wave went up his arm. Siddhartha's muscles ached, and he knew that Devadatta had an advantage over him. This was his cousin's first combat of the day, while Siddhartha had been fighting for hours. He had to win quickly or his energy would fail. Knowing that Devadatta was following his eyes as well, he made a feint, glancing right, taking a half step in that direction. When Devadatta's dagger followed him, the move opened up his body, and Siddhartha stuck his sword into the exposed midriff. It was incredible luck. If the blow had struck home, it would have been fatal.

But in the instant before the blade entered Devadatta's body, Siddhartha heard his heartbeat thud in his ears with long stretches in between the strokes. He felt the breeze blow the hairs on his forearm slowly, delicately, back and forth, and each blink of an eye was like a door closing, leading to blackness, before it opened again and the world reappeared.

He felt very different from before—calm, free of anger. Out of the corner of his eye he could see that the mood of the king had shifted. Suddhodana was returning to reason, and as he did, the thought of loss of his only son was intolerable. Suddhodana was within half a breath of stopping the fight. He had yet to register that Siddhartha was about to win. The last thing Siddhartha's eye caught was his sword inching closer to its perfect target.

Suddhodana shouted, "Stand back, a fighter is down!" He wanted to run forward and embrace his son. The prince stood over Devadatta's fallen body, panting hard.

"Get up," he said. Devadatta was shaking his head. Instead of delivering a fatal wound, Siddhartha's sword tip had been deflected, slicing the skin over his heart. He spat out the dust he'd swallowed going down, aiming deliberately at Siddhartha's feet. Siddhartha's eyes fixed on the slimy spot it made.

He held out his hand to Devadatta. "You win, if it pleases you."

Devadatta refused the hand with contempt. "It's not going to be that easy, boy," he hissed. Siddhartha ignored the jibe and turned around.

"I quit this fight," he said in a loud voice, keeping his eyes away from the king's. "I can't prevail over a better man. Give the honor to my cousin."

Suddhodana shook his head. "You have prevailed. The contest is over," he shouted, but few heard him. Screams rent the air because, at the moment when Siddhartha turned away from him, Devadatta lifted his dagger and raked its rippled

blade across the small of his opponent's back. Siddhartha staggered. Devadatta brought back his arm to strike straight up into his enemy's stomach as he doubled over.

Siddhartha never gave him the chance. He reached out and grabbed Devadatta's hair with one hand while batting the threatening dagger away with the other. The gash it made across his palm was insignificant; rage canceled out the pain. He banged Devadatta's skull into the packed dirt. The first time was enough to make his opponent half senseless, but Siddhartha repeated the action twice more. Devadatta's eyes betrayed panic when he realized that he was alone and defenseless. The second time his head smashed against the ground, his eyes glazed over; the third smash, and they rolled up into his head.

Siddhartha paid no attention. He lifted Devadatta's limp body off the ground in a wrestler's hold around the chest, squeezing the breath out of him. It was remarkably easy to do, as if he were shaking a rag doll. Siddhartha locked his arms into a vice and leaned back, his face to the sky. Inside a voice said, "*This* is freedom. This is what the gods feel like when they mete out death." Siddhartha believed the voice and waited for the moment when he would let Devadatta's body fall.

As his face turned up to the sky, which was still divided between sun and clouds, his arms felt Devadatta's body grow more and more still.

Surrender, and be free.

For the first time since he could remember, a voice came to him from another place. Siddhartha's grip weakened just a fraction.

Surrender, and be free.

When the voice came back again, Siddhartha could hardly keep from shouting back, *Haven't I already surrendered?* He had conceded the fight to his enemy, yet instead of freeing him, it had opened him to treachery. What was this new

surrender? Where would it take him? Siddhartha felt seized with fear. If he let go of Devadatta, their old enmity would be twice as strong; he would have failed his father and turned victory into humiliation. None of that mattered now. Deep down he knew what he had to surrender. The voice wanted him to jump into the abyss, a place deep inside and completely unknown to him. It was the only way out.

Devadatta quivered and softly moaned. Siddhartha dropped him without being aware of his action. He walked to the edge of a cliff—the image in his mind was as real to him as anything he'd ever seen—and leaped. He saw his arms fly up and the yawning gulf, like a monstrous mouth, below him. His first impulse was to shriek, so dizzying was the sensation of plummeting into emptiness. *This must be like dying*, he thought. He couldn't feel his body anymore; no sights or sounds reached him from the outside world. But his worst fears were unfounded. The void was not a place of destruction and chaos. No, it was very different.

He saw his mother holding a baby in her arms, and her face was the sun. He saw Mara sitting on his throne surrounded by swarming, buzzing entities, and his face was the night. He saw his father, an infant swaddled in a suit of armor, crying to be let out because he was suffocating. He saw Sujata, the stars, Channa riding the white stallion Kanthaka. The spectacle whirled and slipped past him like painted gossamer, and Siddhartha laughed, feeling exhilarated. The things that had meant so much were as thin and fragile as tissue.

He kept on falling. The tissuelike images flew apart. It was like watching the wind scatter leaves, and the leaves were his life. As this life evaporated before his eyes, Siddhartha felt a shiver, as if someone had ripped off his winter coat and left him naked in the cold. But he wasn't naked, and far from dead. Instead of the mask of images and memories, surrounding him on every side was something pure and free: life itself. He couldn't remember who he was. There was nothing left of his

fears and dreams, nothing to do, nothing to want. He was simply alive, the breath of the breath, the eye of the eye.

The falling sensation ended. Siddhartha was held in suspension, an invisible spider dangling from an invisible thread. It would have been wonderful to remain like that. It would have been everything. Then a low throbbing could be heard like distant thunder, and it rolled toward him, a wave of thunder that boomed in the night until the muffled boom turned into a word.

“Son?”

Siddhartha opened his eyes. His father’s stricken face covered the sky. *I’m all right*, he wanted to say, seeing the sick worry in the king’s eyes. No words came out. They were stifled by Siddhartha’s emotions. He reached back in his mind, trying to return to where he’d been after he leaped into the abyss. There was nothing there.

He felt his father lifting his head; other arms were under his legs and torso. They lowered him onto a litter, and then he was jounced up and down as the bearers ran with him toward the palace. He was returning to his right mind now, full of images and memories once again. What had he done to Devadatta? What would happen to Channa? His whole body felt heavier; it was being tied to earth again by a thousand threads. Siddhartha struggled, desperate to break free. Then a physician’s soothing voice said, “Try to calm down. Quit fighting.” Someone pressed a cold slimy thing to his forehead, and the last thing Siddhartha saw before passing out was the painted ceiling of his father’s bedroom, in the image of the sky.

“**HEAT STROKE, THAT’S ALL.** Did you see his face? He was sweating like mad, then he turned white as a sheet before they carried him off. He could have died.”

“He went crazy. It was bound to happen. Don’t you know the pressure he’s under? You’d crack too.”

“The wretched boy’s cursed. My wife has a maid who can see demons. The one she saw around him almost scared her to death.”

The rumor mill at court hummed with excited speculation. No one could make their favorite theories stick. They were too bewildered over Siddhartha’s sudden outbreak of violence. Would he ever be himself again? The gods of gossip were not sure. After three days the leeching was over, and the royal physicians, squeezing clotted blood between their fingers, declared that the worst poisons had been extracted. The astrologers sounded guardedly optimistic about the transit of Mercury coming to an end after it had combusted with the sun. In their eyes, malefic forces had taken over Siddhartha. Suddhodana didn’t believe any of it. But no one had died, and if his guests went away thinking he had raised a half-demented son, it was better than thinking he had raised a gentle one.

Even though Devadatta’s dagger had drawn considerable blood, and losing more was dangerous, Siddhartha felt no distress over the leeching—not compared to the shroud of sadness that would not unwind from his heart. His father refused to leave him unattended, but late at night when the nurse’s head lolled on her breast—Siddhartha made sure she was given a double cup of liquor with supper—he crept out of bed and paced the floor. In his mind he would approach the edge of an abyss again, but when he jumped, nothing happened. It was simply his imagination.

Siddhartha got reluctant permission to have Channa admitted to his room. He breathed a sigh when he set eyes on him. He was still alive. Siddhartha’s relief was too enormous to disguise. Channa was embarrassed; he raised his voice and talked about the whole affair with bravado. “No one’s going to kill me. I have friends everywhere. I’m protected.” But Siddhartha noticed welts on Channa’s shoulders, and when he pressed him for an explanation, the truth emerged.

There was consternation on the field of combat when Siddhartha and Devadatta had both been carried away. The king ordered the massed fighters to remain in place, which

added an air of threat to the confusion, but he wanted to make sure that every guest realized that his army was always at the ready. No one had time for Channa, who ran back to the stables and packed his best saddle horse to leave. As he was stuffing food and blankets into leather bags, he sensed that someone had entered the stall.

“Father?” He turned around expecting to confront Bikram, who would never forgive him for touching a high-caste. But it was the king, who had not forgotten Channa for a moment. He brandished a whip in his hands.

“I expect you to take what’s coming to you and then keep your mouth shut.”

Without waiting for a reaction, Suddhodana struck the youth across the chest with the lash’s iron-tipped barbs—there were three, a gentler version of the deadly seven-tipped whip used in battle. The pain was excruciating; Channa fell to the ground and rolled over, which was fortunate, because the king was in a genuine rage and vented it by striking him, over and over, across the back and shoulders instead of his face.

The only way that Channa could keep from passing out was to force himself not to count the blows. *This one’s the last*, he thought every time the iron hooks raked his flesh. It never was the last, however, or so it seemed. Then he became aware that the searing pain was coming not from the lash anymore but from the wounds he already had. Channa risked looking up, and he saw the king stooped over, panting hard with the whip dropped to the stable floor.

“Walk around, make sure everyone sees your wounds. Don’t dress them for two days.” Suddhodana was focused on him, but not with rage or implacable cold hatred. Channa could almost read sympathy, as if he’d had to punish his own son. “Then have Bikram hide you for a month, somewhere far away. Somewhere a hired assassin won’t look. They’re lazy; they won’t go very far to find you. And never go near Devadatta again, understand?”

They both knew that Channa was being let off easy. By rights he should have been turned over to the priests, who would have meted out maximum punishment as a show of power over the king. As Suddhodana turned away, Channa mumbled, “Thank you.”

The king looked back at him, and now his eyes were stone cold. “Your father was a horse thief when I met him. That’s a hanging offense, and if I ever have a whim to kill him, why not take the son along too? Just to be sure.”

Channa related only the bare bones of this incident to Siddhartha. The prince was troubled enough by the welts he could see; the worst were hidden under Channa’s tunic. Several days passed before Siddhartha told Channa about his own mysterious experience.

Channa was amazed. “You turned into a god. What else could it be?”

Siddhartha didn’t know whether to be shocked or amused. But when Channa’s face remained serious, even a little awed, he said, “I shouldn’t have told you. I should just go to old Canki and get him to purify me.”

“I wouldn’t. Not until somebody purifies *him*.” Channa’s contempt for the Brahmin was open, despite the risk he was running if the priest should find out. “How long have I been getting school from him? Ever since any of us can remember. You think that matters? He’d see me stretched out on a rack as soon as look at me. He thinks I’m an animal, and he has scripture to back him up.”

Siddhartha looked grim. “And I’m not much better.”

Channa was stunned; the color rushed to his face. Siddhartha rushed ahead. “I mean, caste keeps my life perfect. That’s the word you used, right? It doesn’t matter if you’re stronger than me or smarter or braver. The fact that we embraced when you walked in the door today could mean a death sentence if my father decreed it.”

Channa straightened up. “I am stronger than you, that part’s true.”

“The rest is true too.” Siddhartha couldn’t help smiling.

Channa said, “You can change the world when it’s yours to play with. The rest of us have to live in it.”

“You think I’m going to get the world?”

“It’s just what they say.”

Siddhartha knew it was better to let the whole subject die. He had lived a long time with the knowledge that even his best friend, at some level that reason couldn’t touch, regarded him with superstitious awe. It wouldn’t matter that Channa had seen the worst of Siddhartha, watched him cry, run away, complain bitterly about his father. It wouldn’t matter that the prince was a creature of flesh and blood or that Channa had often in the heat of sword practice drawn his blood. Being the friend of a royal gave Channa the special status and protection that he enjoyed. But there was a limit to royal protection with an enemy as cunning as Devadatta.

The realization came to Siddhartha that he had always regarded his cousin with anxiety. Devadatta had been like a blade held lightly against his throat. That’s what was now missing. Fear. Siddhartha couldn’t bring back the old sense of threat.

If he wasn’t afraid of Devadatta anymore, what else wasn’t he afraid of? Siddhartha reached inside and opened the hidden trunks of memory, expecting that phantoms of dread would fly out. But the trunk was empty. He had been a death-haunted child, a boy full of fears without a mother.

Tears were rolling down his cheeks now. It was the first time in his life that truth had made Siddhartha weep. That’s what had changed when he jumped into the abyss. He exchanged illusion for truth. He felt purified, and yet some part of him couldn’t rejoice in it. What would it be like to be the only man who wasn’t afraid? His father was afraid despite his battles won; Canki was afraid despite the favor of the gods;

Channa was afraid despite his bravado. None of them would be able to grasp this change in Siddhartha. They might even hate him for it.

WITH THE CURTAINS CLOSED and one candle guttering to a spark, Sujata's room was almost dark. She lay in bed staring at the ceiling. In her mind she kept going over what she should have said to Siddhartha. Everything had gone wrong. Even when she got her heart's desire and he showed that he wanted her, she had run away. Sometimes when she woke up in the middle of the night, all Sujata could think about was the fact that Siddhartha had looked at her with longing. She fixed that look in her mind and swore she would never let it go.

The simple truth is that Sujata was waiting for Siddhartha to come to her on his own. So when she lay half asleep and the door creaked open, Sujata was instantly wide awake. She trembled under the sheets and widened her eyes to see him in the dark, to make sure this wasn't another phantom of her imagination.

She saw the outline of a strong young man moving toward the bed, his bearing erect, moving quickly because he desired her so strongly. Fear and exultation fought wildly in Sujata's breast. If only her bed could have been prepared properly for love, with scattered flower petals, rose water, and sprinkled spices known to make a man aroused.

For a fleeting instant Sujata thought of her mother and wondered if she had been in the same situation. She banished this thought as soon as it came. She didn't want to think about anything when Siddhartha's hand took hers; he was bending over her, lowering his face to kiss her.

“Hold still. If you scream I'll kill you.”

Scream was all she wanted to do, in that instant when she realized this wasn't Siddhartha and horror had entered her sanctuary. The man's hand came over her face, covering

mouth and nose so that she would be too breathless to cry out, even to think. But panic had already seen to that.

“You’ve been waiting for me a long time. I’ve seen your light. I wanted the moment to be perfect, sweetheart.”

It was unmistakably Devadatta. He tore open her bodice with quick efficiency and began to knead her breasts with his hands, roughly and without consideration for how it hurt her.

Please stop.... I’ll do whatever you want.

With her breathing cut off, Sujata didn’t know if she actually spoke those words or if they were a desperate prayer. Devadatta had opened her dress against her feeble struggling, and she felt his hand opening her legs. Half-suffocated as she was, she couldn’t sob. Devadatta was having her, and his thrusts were violent signals of his savagery and disdain.

She went limp, hoping that her rapist would spare her more violence. Devadatta suddenly stopped what he was doing to her. “I know who you want!” he said, and the menace in his voice should have warned her. But Sujata, knowing she was dead, felt a flood of relief.

The only mercy remaining to her was that Devadatta acted swiftly in the dark. She couldn’t detect him pulling out his rippled dagger. “Remember that the last thing you ever saw was me,” he growled at the instant that the blade swept across her eyes. Sujata heard a shriek that must have been her own, then the searing pain came, and she stopped breathing. She was spared the spectacle of Devadatta rolling off her body with a groan. He tried to control himself, but his hands were shaking.

Devadatta realized his predicament: someone would come sooner or later, and there was no time to waste. He seized hold of himself and started the work in front of him. He wrapped Sujata in bed sheets and tied her shrouded body with curtain cords. He easily slipped past the guards and found a sentry’s horse tethered by the gates. He loaded the corpse on its rump and rode quietly toward the river. Mara was already there; he

stood by while Devadatta, still not speaking, strong enough that carrying the body didn't make him groan with exertion, approached the water.

“Weigh her down with stones,” Mara ordered. Devadatta shot him a look of hatred and dumped the bundle into the water. The bed sheets were not securely tied, and they billowed out over the surface of the river, a spectral white like sails in the moonlight. They retained enough air in bulges and bubbles that Sujata didn't sink immediately, and the fast current carried her away. Devadatta didn't wait. He wanted to forget that Mara was beside him.

“Not beside, dearest. Inside,” Mara said with satisfaction.

Devadatta trembled in despair. He had no doubt that the gods didn't exist. But at that moment he understood why, when the horror of life finally reveals itself, somebody had to invent them.

10

Sujata's disappearance wasn't discovered for several days. The first day a maid ran to Kumbira with the news that the tray of food left outside Sujata's door was untouched.

"She's always pouting. Wait till she gets hungry enough." Sujata's staying in her room hadn't hid her plight from Kumbira, who knew well enough that she was lovesick. But when her food was untouched the second day, Kumbira knocked on the door and entered. What she saw made her react quickly.

"Run away. Now."

Kumbira pushed the maid who had followed her out the door, hoping that the drawn curtains hid the sight of blood on the stripped bed. But the frightened girl certainly saw something, which left Kumbira very little time before palace rumors would spread like wildfire. She immediately went to the king and laid before him everything that had happened between Sujata and the prince.

Suddhodana took the news more calmly than she had expected. And if the king was concerned about Sujata's fate, it certainly didn't show. "She was too ashamed to stay. Send a few men to search where she went. Not too many." It wasn't even half an hour before Channa carried the news to the prince, who immediately ran to Sujata's room. Kumbira had been swift enough in having the bed removed; even so, Siddhartha was alarmed at Sujata's sudden disappearance.

"I've sent my men out," Suddhodana told him. "What else do you expect me to do? She wanted to go home. Somebody should have kept her from getting so lonely."

Siddhartha was stung by his father's implication. The pleasure pavilion had been open to him since he was sixteen, but in those two years he hadn't gone there. Suddhodana was offended by this show of chastity. "I didn't put those girls there so you could pray with them," he had once taunted.

Stymied by his father's indifference to Sujata, Siddhartha ran to Channa. "We have to find her."

"Do we? Stop and think," said Channa. "There's a good chance your father is behind it himself. He wants her gone."

"You think she's like an old horse?" Siddhartha said coldly. He was well aware that his father caused people to disappear from sight after a certain age, no different from what went on in the stables.

Channa didn't argue. He put a saddle on his favorite mount and started to lead it outside. "Don't tell anyone I'm gone," he said. "You're staying here." He saw Siddhartha flush a deep scarlet. "Go ahead, blame me," said Channa. "You can't risk leaving."

Siddhartha was all too aware that if he rode past the palace gates in search of Sujata, no one could predict his father's reaction. Every person at court had connived to keep him prisoner. But that wasn't going to stop him. Siddhartha strode over to the saddle rack, took down a saddle, and began to cinch it on Kanthaka. The stallion usually stood still for him, but it shied and almost bucked.

"Easy," Siddhartha whispered.

When he had mounted, Siddhartha headed toward the woods, leading the way. On their hunts Channa had once pointed out a stream that ran steeply down a hillside and more than once, despite the king's soldiers on patrol, the prince wondered if it was an escape route. Channa had said, "There's a dry gully at the bottom. If I ever wanted to leave without anybody knowing, I'd take the horses through the stream first to kill the scent. It's even steeper beyond. Nobody bothers to patrol it."

They headed that way now because if he was gone even an hour a scouting party would be sent out after him. That much was a given. The stream was easy to find; it was steep and rocky enough that both riders kept quiet, concentrating on the horses' footing. The dry gully, as Channa had promised, got even steeper. They decided to walk the animals down. Under the black jungle canopy of tangled trees and vines, the sun struck their skin in dappled spots, but each speck felt searing at high noon. It wasn't the way Siddhartha had envisioned his break to freedom. Reality dictated otherwise.

Channa began talking again, letting out his sentences in short bursts as he negotiated the scree-strewn slope. "My father swore me to secrecy about what happened when you and I were still sucking at the breast. The king sent them all away. All the old, sick ones. It was a bad time."

Siddhartha had come to that conclusion on his own. After his mother's death, it was the grimmest fact about his birth. Channa stopped talking, trying to calm his horse as the slippery ground slid out from under its feet. The gully led to an overgrown bamboo thicket, the space between the trees too close for a horse to squeeze through.

"There's an old road just beyond. They took some of them that way."

"Who?"

"Some women. Ones the king didn't need anymore."

Channa was recounting the past in a clipped, flat voice, like a physician noting the cause of death. "He told Bikram to take them out a secret way, the one we're following. He didn't want anybody to see."

Siddhartha had a realization. "You hate him, don't you?"

"You really want to know?" Without turning around, Channa lifted up his shirt, exposing the full extent of his wounds from the whipping. "A king's no better than a criminal." Silence followed until they reached the end of the

thick bamboo. Channa stopped his horse and faced Siddhartha. "You can turn back, you know. Nobody would be the wiser."

"Why would I?"

Channa looked more thoughtful than Siddhartha had ever seen him. "Your father may be a bastard, but he could be right, doing what he did. He kept misery away from you. Isn't that a good thing? I try to work it out in my mind."

"He wasn't right."

The determination in Siddhartha's voice caught Channa's attention.

"Three years went by. One of the women had a baby. Life was too hard, and she died. The baby survived. So your father sent guilt money and food, year after year."

"Until she was old enough to bring to court," said Siddhartha.

"Just be glad she's not your half sister." Channa's tone was indifferent now. He'd taken the weight off his shoulders. "So, their village is up ahead. That's where we have the best chance of finding Sujata if she did run away. Not that I believe it."

Siddhartha didn't ask Channa what he did believe. He had his own premonitions. He couldn't escape the fact that he hadn't seen Devadatta in the past few days. It would be like him to kidnap Sujata for revenge. Far better if the king had packed her off in the night instead.

Siddhartha gazed down at the village, which looked normal from a distance, a single dirt street winding between low bamboo huts, the only oddity being the parched wastelands and untended fields on the outskirts. *Why aren't the farmers tending their crops?*

"Come on. You can't really see much from here," said Channa. He led the way down a narrow rutted trail. Weeds grew up to the horses' stomachs. Channa pointed them out. "Nobody comes this way. They probably haven't seen visitors for half a year."

“Why not?” There was no plague in the area, and the lushness of the undergrowth meant there had been no recent drought.

“Because this is ‘the forgotten city.’ That’s what everyone calls it. I like ‘the king’s city’ better. Don’t ask me any more,” said Channa.

In half a mile the trail leveled off, and soon they were riding past the first few huts on the village fringe. Their roofs were rain-stained gray, the wood jambs falling down around the sagging doors. No one seemed to live inside, or else they were used to hiding from strangers. The next clump of huts was just as dilapidated. Siddhartha caught a glimpse of faces at the window that withdrew as soon as he spied them.

“Here,” said Channa. He dismounted in front of a hut more ruined than the rest, its door stolen and the carved ornaments of gods and demons stripped from the eaves. “This was hers, the mother’s.”

Sujata couldn’t be here, living like this, Siddhartha thought. But he got down and followed Channa into the bleak shell of a house. The evidence of vermin and gaping holes in the floor told him that no one had entered in months. A torn scrap of red silk over the back window and a cracked teapot beside the charcoal hole used for cooking were the only signs that a woman could have made a home there.

“Let’s go back. I’ll demand that my father tell me where she is,” Siddhartha said, his heart sinking. He sensed a truth he couldn’t face.

When they stepped outside, things had changed. People had emerged from nowhere, like rabbits from their warrens. A clutch of men surrounded the horses.

“Stop! Hey, stop!” Channa shouted. A few of them were trying to uncinch the saddles. Channa was armed and they weren’t, but when he drew his sword, Siddhartha held his arm back.

“Who are they?” he asked grimly.

The people, perhaps a dozen in all, were starving and dressed in rags that hung from their bones. All had gray hair, sometimes only a scrap left over their exposed skulls.

“They’re the forgotten,” said Channa. “We’ve come to their city.”

“And my father sent them here?”

Channa nodded. The decrepit old men who tried to steal their saddles had fallen to the ground, prostrating themselves. The women came forward and mutely held their cupped hands out for food. “Give them what we have,” said Siddhartha. There were bits of provisions in the saddlebags. He looked away when Channa produced bread and meat to hand out; he couldn’t face the sight of beggars clawing for scraps.

The scuffle drew more attention, and now Siddhartha could see others approaching from the main part of the village. “Let’s go,” urged Channa.

“Why? They’re not dangerous.” This went without saying since the newcomers were as old as the first ones they’d met.

Channa was restless nonetheless. “I could knock them all down with one swipe of my sword,” he said. “But it’s still not safe.”

“Why not? What’s wrong with them?”

Channa didn’t know how much Siddhartha was oblivious of, so he spoke as if to a small child. “These people were at court when you were born, and even then they were too old to be kept around. Those over there, walking with crutches, they’re lame. They’ve been sick, but nobody treated them. The ones who are coughing with their mouths covered over with cloth, don’t touch them. They’re sick; they carry disease, and we could get it too. I’m still young and healthy, thank you.”

“We’ll become like them?” asked Siddhartha, genuinely puzzled.

“Someday.”

“All of us?”

“All of us,” said Channa. Ignoring what Siddhartha would think, he kicked at a barefoot old woman who had crawled on the ground to touch his sandals.

Siddhartha was muttering words to himself that were never spoken around him. *Old. Lamé. Sick. Diseased.* How could he ever have imagined that he had suffered? Not compared to this.

“How do they stand it?” he murmured. Now the gathering crowd’s mood had changed. Their hollow faces darkened, and there was angry muttering.

“They realize we’ve come from the court,” said Channa. He and Siddhartha were dressed in plain white cotton, but the mounts’ trappings were stamped with the royal insignia. “Get on your horse. We’re going.”

Siddhartha climbed up again, but instead of turning Kanthaka toward home, he kept riding into the forgotten city. The streets were lined with haggard ghosts, and eyes bulging from hunger stared at him. Siddhartha prayed that his aunties hadn’t been banished here when they had disappeared from court.

There was one building better repaired than the others, and no one stood in front of it. For some reason Siddhartha stopped, his attention drawn to its covered windows and a Shiva statue at the door decorated with wilting wildflowers. “I want to go inside,” he said.

“No, you don’t,” Channa said.

The smell coming from the building was unmistakable. Siddhartha had come across that smell in the woods where a rotting deer carcass lay. He dismounted and pushed the door open. He stepped into a dim, moist, fetid room. In the watery beams of light coming through the shutters Siddhartha could see someone sleeping on a table, naked except for a light sheet across the torso. No, not sleeping but lying motionless. The man’s face was gray-white, eyes closed, and his slack, sagging mouth made him look both angry and sad.

“What is this place?” Siddhartha asked. He could guess well enough, but talking helped him avoid getting sick.

“The house of the dead. Don’t get close. They’re not blessed.”

As his eyes adjusted to the light, Siddhartha saw that there were other corpses on the floor, laid side by side and covered with burlap; the worst smell came from them. The man on the table must be newly dead.

Siddhartha wasn’t aware that he had moved closer. He reached out and touched the corpse, eerily certain that the old man would wake with a start. The coldness of the flesh surprised him; it felt colder than the air in the room. Despite the fact that the man was dead, Siddhartha wanted to apologize. He hadn’t asked permission to touch him, and they were strangers.

“Is this all for them?” he asked. “Do the dead live in their house?”

“No, they’ll rot if they stay here. Bodies are burned,” explained Channa.

Siddhartha winced. “So one day you might burn me,” he murmured. Channa had lingered by the door, and his reaction to Siddhartha’s curiosity was a growing impatience.

“What’s wrong with that? I’m glad if they burn me. My ashes will go into the river. When there’s nothing left for demons to grab on to, I’ll go to heaven. You’ll have to break my skull with an ax to let my spirit out first.”

If Channa intended to shock Siddhartha, it didn’t work. Bemused, Siddhartha muttered, “Is that how it’s done? Then why are they still here? Don’t they have axes?”

Channa shrugged. “There’s no wood and nobody strong enough to cut some. They probably wait for wandering monks to come through.”

Channa’s impatience wouldn’t allow them to stay any longer. Siddhartha took the hand of the corpse, which had

fallen limply to its side, and replaced it across the man's chest. When he came out of the house of the dead, the crowd outside looked angrier than before.

"Prince?" someone called out. "Are you the king's son? Do you like what you've done to us?" He hadn't counted on being recognized. A sense of shame kept him from speaking.

I will try to help you, I promise, he thought. Muttered threats surrounded Siddhartha as he walked up to Kanthaka. An old woman spat on the ground while an unseen voice said, "Better your mother had died sooner, you hear me? Why were you ever born?"

"Stop it!" One of the old men stepped forward, raising his hands and shushing the others. His starved body was wrapped in dirty hemp cloth, but underneath Siddhartha glimpsed saffron rags, the color of Canki's robes.

"The gods, not this noble youth, have brought such misfortune on us. We should give him money to take back and make offerings for us." Scorn greeted the old priest's suggestion; he wriggled his way through the crowd. "Blessings, blessings," he muttered as he edged closer to Siddhartha.

The old priest smelled almost as bad as the corpses. He smiled toothlessly, and Siddhartha was ashamed of himself for drawing back. "Bend close, young prince, and let me whisper a special blessing in your ear."

Siddhartha forced himself to lean over, closing his eyes against the old man's fetid breath. "I accept your blessing," he said politely.

"And I curse you to hell unless you take me back with you." The vehemence in the old priest's voice was like cobra venom. Siddhartha jerked back. Without a word he jumped into the saddle. He felt the priest's tight, bony grip on his ankle, but he kicked free and galloped off. Behind him the population of the forgotten city jeered and catcalled. Others cried out piteously, and when he could no longer hear any of

them, Siddhartha stopped. Kanthaka's sides were heaving; so were Siddhartha's. He leaned over and whispered, "Forgive me," into Kanthaka's ear, even though he hadn't driven him that hard.

Channa caught up where the road was starting to slope back upward and become a mountain trail again. Siddhartha waited for him. "How often have you come here?" he asked.

"Once or twice. But you're not coming back. What's here for you? Your father won't let you save them, and by the time you're king they'll all be dead. Face facts. One strong wind this winter is all it would take."

Siddhartha hated these words but didn't argue. The sun was still mercilessly hot, and they had given their goatskins of water to the old ones.

Channa's right. It should be called the king's city. His conscience searched for what to do. Should he go back and farm the fields himself with a few slaves from the palace, against his father's wishes? Would it do the slightest good to send them to the forgotten city? Underneath all this was Sujata, who haunted him now more than at the moment he had learned she was gone. For a fleeting instant he could see her on a table in the house of the dead.

It was at that painful moment that Siddhartha caught a glimpse of someone. A naked hermit was hidden in the thick underbrush, crouching on his heels. His sun-brown skin made him nearly invisible against the ground except for his beard, which was nearly white. If Siddhartha hadn't happened to turn for a last glimpse behind, he would have missed him.

"Asita!" Siddhartha called out, jumping down from his horse. The sudden motion must have frightened the hermit, who scurried away into the thicket out of sight. "Wait, don't you know me?" Siddhartha was baffled but plunged into the underbrush, heedless of thorns and snakes. The hermit was escaping as noiselessly as a deer. Siddhartha stopped, straining his ears to catch any telltale sound. Channa came up behind him. "What's wrong?"

“You didn’t see him? It was Asita.”

“If it was, he’s a million years old. I thought I saw an old man, that’s all. Probably following us from the village,” said Channa.

But they both knew an old man couldn’t keep up with horses. Siddhartha was too excited to stop and convince Channa. “Asita!” he called.

Siddhartha set a direction upslope and followed it, telling Channa to wait below. There was no trail to follow anymore, and after a moment he was immersed in deepest jungle. Scarlet parrots scolded him from overhead; a lone monkey scouring the ground for fallen fruit was startled and leaped up a tree with a scream. Siddhartha pressed on with more energy, even though he knew he was running aimlessly, fueled by what he wanted to find rather than what he would. Then, just when it was undeniable that the jungle had swallowed up all traces of the hermit, he stumbled on something.

Hidden in the dense growth was a small clearing, so shaded by trees that it felt like a green cave. Panting, Siddhartha stopped and looked around. Someone definitely lived here. From a fire circle, wisps of smoke arose. A bamboo lean-to nestled in one corner with moss spread for a bed. His eye was caught by a pile of rocks made into a shrine. On top was the only sign that anyone but a primitive called the place home: a small picture of Shiva painted in jewel tones, like the forlorn one he’d seen at the house of the dead.

But this god was well tended, with fresh pink wood orchids at the base. Shiva was sitting in lotus position, a tiger skin wrapped around his shoulders. His eyes were closed; a mysterious smile played across his face. Gazing at him, Siddhartha felt exhausted. He had no idea where he was and no longing for anywhere else. Perhaps the faint memory of a rose-apple tree when he was a boy came to mind. He felt his legs give way, and he sat on the ground facing Shiva. He folded his legs in the same position as the god’s and closed his eyes.

The green cave was cool and soothing. Siddhartha felt that he belonged here, but there was little time for thinking. A kind of seductive silence wanted to pull him in. It softly surrounded him, and he gave in to the embrace. He could feel his breath moving in and out of his chest, growing fainter and fainter. A fly landed on his arm, and it was as if he could feel every step of its feet before it flew away again.

Nothing changed for a time—how long, he couldn't judge—and then Siddhartha's eyes opened. Before him squatted the old hermit on his heels. It wasn't Asita, but the two were made from the same mold. The hermit had deep brown eyes whose calm belied his weathered skin. Neither of them moved. Then the hermit raised a finger to his lips, and Siddhartha nodded imperceptibly, letting his eyelids close again, sinking back down into the silence. Now he clearly saw the image of a boy sitting under a rose-apple tree while the anxious world swirled around him. How had he forgotten Asita's advice back then, that there would always be a place for him to go when he was in trouble?

With a deep sigh of relief, Siddhartha knew he was back. He hadn't remembered the silence, but *it* had remembered him. And waited. It would be so easy to sit forever. A gentle current flowed through his body, and when a thought chanced to arise, it escaped like a dandelion puff blown away in the breeze.

Before time and space disappeared like thieves in the night, he had a fleeting perception. Something he couldn't identify—a cloud of golden flecks? a ghost wearing a smile? a god?—was hovering a few inches over his head, just where the current had escaped. The cloud or god shimmered for a second. Siddhartha had the distinct feeling that it was watching him.

Then without any warning it began to descend.

PART TWO

GAUTAMA THE MONK

11

The skies had given plenty of warning all day. Clouds with sagging gray bellies almost touched the treetops. Night fell quickly, before shelter could be found. The young monk was curled up under a sal tree in the forest when the rain hit, not with a few warm droplets but all at once, as if mischievous monkeys in the trees had overturned a bucket on his head. The monk awoke with a sputter. He squatted in the mud, shivering, soaked to the bone. Being Prince Siddhartha had filled up twenty-nine years; being a penniless monk had filled up barely a month.

He noticed something nearby. A small clutch of men had built a campfire whose flicker peeked through gaps in the jungle. The monk crept near and saw that they had found protection in the mouth of a cave. It was dangerous to intrude on them. They might be *dacoits*, bandits who had no scruples about killing a holy man simply for his sandals. Also, asking for help wasn't part of the rules. If a wandering monk appeared at their back door, householders were obligated to bring food out to him and offer shelter for the night; sacred duty demanded as much. But the beggar at the door had to remain silent. Only his presence could speak for him, no matter how hungry he might be, even starving.

Sitting in meditation while your nose filled with the smells of rice and lamb cooking over a fire was pure agony. A warrior's discipline, by comparison, was child's play. The young monk always lost focus: he salivated; his stomach growled. But this particular night he didn't have to beg. One of the men sitting around the campfire noticed him and took pity.

Siddhartha was startled to see him carrying an ax as he approached, but then he realized the men were woodcutters.

“*Namaste*,” he murmured, bowing his head. The woodcutter, a lumbering, thickset man, made no reply. *Namaste* was the simplest form of hello, but from a monk it was also a blessing: *I greet what is holy in you*. Siddhartha noticed that without thinking, he had put a harmless tone in his voice. So in a single word he had said, “Hello, I bow to your sacredness. Please don’t hurt me.”

“What are you hanging around for?” the man said gruffly.

“I saw your fire,” said Siddhartha. “I should have headed for a village, but it got dark too soon.”

“Someone like you isn’t going to get very far.” The man was scowling now. “What’s your name?”

“Gautama.” Siddhartha held his breath. He had taken on his family name, which was known everywhere. But for centuries it had also been a clan name, and many common people carried it.

“Well, you didn’t get any food today, Gautama, that’s clear enough.”

The young monk had practiced saying the name in his head—*Gautama, Gautama*—but this was the first time another person had used it. Losing his old name was the start of losing his old self. He felt forlorn and victorious at the same time.

“You’d be better off with an honest living that doesn’t depend on another man’s sweat,” the woodcutter said.

Gautama hung his head. If this was a taunt, it was better not to look him in the eye. Exhausted or not, Gautama still knew how to defend himself like a warrior. (When suspicious characters would stare at him and wait by the road while he passed, his hand had reflexively reached for his sword hilt before he remembered that it wasn’t there.) He forced himself to have humble thoughts. *You’re a holy man. Let God protect you.*

Now the stranger was holding out something. “Take it. You can’t expect any food without a bowl, can you?” He pushed forward a smooth hollow gourd, split in half and filled with steamed rice and potatoes. “I’d ask you to the fire, but some of the others—” He nodded in the direction of the group huddling in the mouth of the cave. None had turned their heads to look at the stranger crouching in the mud. “They’ve had bad run-ins with monks.”

Gautama nodded. In the month he had been wandering, he’d heard tales of criminals and madmen who assumed the disguise of monks so they could roam the countryside undisturbed.

“A blessing on you, brother.” Gautama said this with complete sincerity, and he continued looking into his benefactor’s eyes rather than diving into the food. He knew that his accent gave away that he was high-caste. He touched the man’s arm in gratitude, and the woodcutter was startled. Sometimes, very rarely, a high-caste warrior or noble might take up the life of a wandering monk, but they never touched anyone of low caste, even as beggars.

“And a blessing on you,” the man said. He got up and walked back to the fire.

As a *sannyasi*, one who has completely renounced the world, Gautama was allowed no possessions other than his saffron robes, a walking stick, a string of prayer beads around his neck, and a begging bowl. A monk ate out of his bowl, and when he was done, he washed it in the river and wore it as a hat to keep off the sun and rain. The bowl was what he drank from, and while he was bathing in the river he rinsed himself with it. Gautama turned the gourd around, admiring its simplicity.

Once he had eaten the food the woodcutter gave him, Gautama got to his feet, trying not to groan from the cracked blisters on his soles. He took a last, longing look at the fire—the men were drinking and laughing loudly now—and began slip-sliding through the mud toward the road. You couldn’t

sleep too near the roads because of bandits. As he walked, he wrapped his arms around his thin frame for warmth and tried to find resignation. *It's just rain. This is nothing important. I accept it. I'm at peace.* But resignation was empty peace, with no real satisfaction. What else could he try? Reverence.

Holy gods, protect your servant in time of need.

Repeating a prayer felt better, but his mind wasn't fooled by reverence, either. It injected an ironic aside: *If the gods wanted to protect you, why did they leave you out in the rain?* Gautama was astonished at how many ways his mind could plague him. It blamed him for everything—for his blistered feet, for getting lost in the forest, for making a bed from tree boughs that turned out to be full of lice. Hadn't Prince Siddhartha's mind been calmer before he left home? Sick of arguing with himself, Gautama began to count his steps.

One, two, three.

It was a feeble trick to keep his doubts from attacking him. But he had too many memories, the kind that he couldn't escape on the longest road.

Four, five, six.

The worst memory was of leaving his wife, Yashodhara. She had refused to watch Siddhartha ride beyond the gates. "Go at night. Don't tell me when. It would be like having my heart broken twice," she said. Her face was careworn with the tears she had shed. The two had been married almost ten years. It was such a love match that they had never spent a single night apart.

Yashodhara kept silent the first few days after he made his intention known, but they shared a bed, and one night she found her voice, softly, next to his ear. "Isn't love enough, being here with me?"

Siddhartha wrapped his arm around her. He knew this question cost her an effort. If he said no, she wasn't enough, Yashodhara would feel like a widow when he left. If he said

yes, he had no argument for leaving. After a moment he said, "You are enough for this life."

"Are you looking ahead to the next one?" she asked.

"No, not that. This life is only part of who I am. I need to know everything, and I can't by staying here." His expression was deeply serious, although she couldn't see his face in the dark. "How can I know if I have a soul? Ever since I was a boy I've assumed I did because everyone says so. How can I know if the gods are real? Or that I came from them?"

"Knowing everything is impossible," she said. Siddhartha sighed and held her closer. "It won't be forever," he promised. Yashodhara tried to believe him despite her experience. Everybody knew of husbands who ran off into the forest and never came back. Becoming a sannyasi was a holy act, but respectable men left it for old age.

Many men waited until they were seventy, especially if they had money, and the richest built lavish summerhouses that were a mockery of spiritual retreat. But all kinds of ne'er-do-wells ran away early. It was something you did if life got too hard or you had too many mouths to feed.

Yashodhara realized that some monks had a genuine calling. One day, despite her sorrow, she told her husband, "I know you have to go. I'm your wife. I feel what you feel." But scandal burned her cheeks anyway; a prince of the blood deserting his kingdom was worse, infinitely worse, than some farmer deserting his barren rice fields.

Seven, eight, nine.

Gautama's mind wasn't falling for the feeble trick. *You nearly killed her*, it said with bitter accusation.

Ten, eleven, twelve.

People can die of grief. How would you feel then?

Gautama winced, remembering how much Yashodhara had suffered as his departure neared. Every night made her dread that she would wake up alone in the morning. There was

nothing she could do for him, not even to pack little things for his new life. On the other side of the palace gates a beggar's existence awaited. Suddhodana, now enfeebled with arthritis, had mustered up a brief, reproachful rage, as in the old days. "You can't give me one good reason," he shouted. But the lit fuse sputtered out, and after that his father ignored the whole subject.

When it was finally time, the prince performed two farewell rituals. He went into his wife's chamber and kissed her while she slept, a bar of soft moonlight across her lips. This was a familiar ritual from the days when he had first begun to ride out before dawn in order to reach poor, faraway villages. The forgotten city had shriveled to nothing, its last feeble cast-offs taken under the prince's personal care. He had knelt by the bedside of those who had cursed him the first day he rode into the village.

There was one, a withered scarecrow of a woman named Gutta who was as old as Kumbira, a former ladies' maid overjoyed to come back to the palace. She knew she was there to die. Siddhartha sometimes imagined that Gutta might have been an auntie to him long ago. During her last days he sat vigil, and one night he trusted her enough to ask, "Does it hurt to die?"

She shook her head. "Not as much as you're hurting."

"Why am I hurting?"

"How should I know?" The withered old maid had always been crabby, he knew, and dying hadn't sweetened her temper. After a moment she said, "I'm luckier than you. I'm throwing off my burden, but you keep adding more to yours."

"Is that what you see?" He had heard that the dying told the truth and even had prophetic powers.

She snorted. "Everybody does. Just look at you. You're kind, but you think it's not enough. You give to the poor and sick, but you don't feel happy from it." Her voice grew softer. "You mourn a dead girl there was no hope of finding."

The prince had looked away, feeling a pang from every word. His mission of mercy began while he was searching for Sujata. It became his custom to lead a pack mule loaded with food, crop seeds, and clothing behind his magnificent white stallion, and the three became a familiar sight in the countryside. For the sake of safety, an armed guard rode behind, but he had made sure that the men kept far back, out of sight.

“What does it say if I ride into a village with soldiers?” he asked his father.

“It says nobody better lay a hand on you,” replied the old king, who wanted to send half the garrison with him.

But his son couldn't stand the idea of showing people mercy with one hand and a sword with the other. Soon his kindness was the thing that kept him safe. The local thieves and bandits belonged to their own caste of dacoits. Many of them benefited from the food he took to the starving villages, since dacoit families and dacoit relatives lived in them. The younger, headstrong thieves argued that they still had a right to loot any gold a traveler might be carrying, but the elders knew he carried none.

“His type can't stop himself. If he lays eyes on one colicky baby, he'll throw all his money on the bed if he has any,” they said, quieting the hotheads.

Siddhartha's second ritual of farewell had been to kiss his baby son. The boy was four, old enough to have his own room. The prince had taken a candle and tiptoed in. Rahula slept, not curled up in a ball like most children, but facedown with his limbs spread-eagled, as if he was prepared to take flight. He lay like that now, and his father looked at him a long time, then turned away without kissing him. Resolved as he was, regret would have its way. *If he wakes up and sees me, I'll never go.*

That night of departure Channa drove a chariot to protect Siddhartha, but instead of standing behind him the way he

would in battle, the prince rode Kanthaka, who was old but still strong.

When the gates of Kapilavastu closed behind them and they hit the main dirt road, Kanthaka's hoofbeats became a dull thud, like muffled drums at a funeral. They moved slowly toward the river. Channa's back was rigid with anger; he refused to break his sullen silence. By sunrise the prince was bathing in the green, slow-flowing river. He stepped out and wrapped a saffron skirt around his waist.

"What do I do with those?" asked Channa. He pointed at the embroidered robe and silk shirt hanging from a tree limb. There was no need to give him instructions—royal finery was burned after it was discarded. Channa just wanted an excuse to pick a quarrel.

"It's a waste to burn them if you're really coming back," he said. "Or did you just tell her that?"

Siddhartha ignored the jibe. "Do what you want. They belong to someone who isn't me anymore." He took out a short-bladed razor and began to cut his long hair as close to the scalp as he could.

"Isn't you anymore?" Channa shook his head with disbelief. He had no idea why Siddhartha had gone crazy, only that he had.

Siddhartha continued quietly cutting his hair. He hadn't reckoned on how much sorrow he would create around him by deciding to leave. His father fumed and screamed at the servants. Channa whipped the chariot horses too hard. Smiling court ladies acted vaguely as if they'd been jilted. What they really felt, deep inside, was that he had died.

Siddhartha held out the razor to him. "Do you mind?" he said. Channa looked startled. "You've done so much for me, friend. This is the last thing I'll ask." Siddhartha pointed at the back of his head, where he had made a mess of cutting his hair. Channa reluctantly took the blade. He squatted beside Siddhartha on his heels and began to cut. He was expert at it.

This was something that women didn't do. Barbering was left to men, and on the battlefield soldiers would trim off hair that was too long to fit under a helmet.

At first he was rough, and Siddhartha, saying nothing, gave him a questioning look. "Sorry," Channa mumbled. After a moment he began to settle down. The intimate act distracted him from his grief. Channa knew, as everyone at court did, that only he was allowed to touch the prince—tapping his shoulder to make a point in argument, brushing dirt off his hunting jacket, embracing him when Siddhartha rode off to the villages—but no one openly spoke about this breach of caste rules.

"That's enough." Siddhartha took the razor from Channa's hands. "I don't want anyone to think I have an expert barber."

"No, you're just another monk with hardly a stitch to wear," Channa said.

They parted there by the river as the sun came over the treetops. Channa refused to say farewell; he kept his arms tightly pinned by his side to deflect Siddhartha's attempt to embrace him. As Siddhartha walked away, he trained his eyes straight ahead for the first hour. The jungle canopy was fairly dense, even though trees had been cut down to make the road. For a while he hardly knew how he felt, except in the most basic physical ways. His body felt lighter; the slightest breeze ruffled his thin silk shawl and passed coolly over his skin. Being without long hair and heavy robes was exhilarating and unnerving.

Having been a hunter, he knew how to forage for fruit and wild greens; in the past few years he'd spent days on long treks without provisions. But it wasn't the physical necessities that worried him. To really be Gautama, he would need to find a teacher. There were forest hermitages scattered over the countryside, most of them near big villages and towns. Saffron-robed beggars had become a common sight on the wide streets of cities beyond the kingdom of Sakya. Their increasing numbers baffled people, and the priests muttered

about shiftless pretenders. Some kind of spiritual ferment was taking hold. Before he left home, Siddhartha was intrigued by this new movement, which didn't even have a name yet.

"It's young rascals, these so-called holy men," a silk merchant complained. "They fear work like the plague. They're abandoning the farms and turning away from their parents. Nothing seems to hold them back, certainly not respect."

The merchant kept his own son tied close to his side with constant demands and a trickle of money, not enough for him to leave or to get married before the father arranged a match.

"How do they live?" Siddhartha asked.

"Like any other lazybones. I wouldn't leave meat hanging in my front yard," said the merchant. "You never know when the gods might want it."

Siddhartha ignored his cynicism. "Who teaches them?"

"You call it teaching? What are the temples for? Not that the priests are much better, mind you." Siddhartha pressed the point, and the merchant eventually realized that he wasn't there simply to reinforce high-caste prejudice. "I'm amazed that you care, Your Highness. From what I can tell, the young ones seek out the older ones. They move around the forest from camp to camp, and the day they arrive at some makeshift school, they bow down before the teacher and ask about the *Dharma*, whatever his angle happens to be. *Dharma*? The priests filled us with enough of that." *Dharma* could mean many things—a man's occupation, the rules of proper conduct, a person's holy duties as outlined by scripture. In this case it was a philosophy, a particular teaching that disciples committed themselves to learn.

"And which *Dharma* is attracting the most followers?" Siddhartha asked.

The merchant shrugged. "Who can say? The young ones keep wandering. They're restless and never stay anywhere very long."

Other travelers that Siddhartha came in contact with were just as hostile. They would have been shocked if they could have penetrated Siddhartha's defenses and seen what lay behind his hospitable smile. He belonged to the same young, restless breed that disappeared into the forest for years at a time. With each passing day he became more and more aware of his calling. Yet, time was pressing. If he stayed in the palace for just a few more years, the king would be old enough to step aside and bequeath Siddhartha the throne. He couldn't let that happen. Not love, not family, not his own conscience could force him to betray himself.

And this is what you call being true to yourself?

Gautama's mind wasn't convinced. The rain continued to pour from the sky, and the road was so dark that more than once he slipped into the gully on the side. There was no use arguing with his mind, which seemed untamable anyway. Gautama wondered if he was alone among mortals, wanting to abandon all that was good in order to suffer the torment and uncertainty of the wild world. He'd add that to his long list of questions to ask his teacher once he found him. If he found him.

12

Gautama passed several travelers on the road who could have directed him to one of the forest ashrams where teachers were located. He greeted them humbly, letting them decide to accept his company for a few miles or not; a handful offered him food for his bowl. But he was reluctant to throw himself into the midst of a band of disciples. Gautama wanted to learn, but he didn't want to give up who he was. His only model for a spiritual teacher was Canki, who had a hidden motive for everything he said.

It wasn't long before he ran across a wandering monk, a thin, sunburned man who seemed old enough to have had a family with grown children. Gautama expected that the sannyasis he met would be very serious or very eccentric. But this monk, who gave his name as Ganaka, turned out to be cheerful and sociable.

"I've been away for twelve years now, lad," he said as they walked along the road. "You meet all sorts. But now the local people know me, and I'm treated pretty well. Your first holdup's a shock, though. The dacoits like you to know who's boss."

"Do you belong to an ashram?" Gautama asked.

Ganaka shrugged. "I've visited them. You get too hungry sometimes."

"What Dharma do you follow?"

The older monk gave him a look. "Is that what you're after? I didn't know you were one of those." He had nothing more to say for a while, and Gautama wondered with some

puzzlement if the word *Dharma* had offended him. How could you be a monk without a teaching? When he decided to speak again, the older monk said, “Don’t let them fool you.”

“Who?”

“These teachers who promise enlightenment. Listen to the voice of experience. I’m not enlightened, and you won’t be either. They’ll feed you a pack of high-sounding ideas, you’ll work for them year after year, and then when they’ve worn you out, you’ll leave with the taste of ashes in your mouth.”

There was a lot to read in Ganaka’s bitter tone. In a sympathetic voice Gautama said, “Tell me your experience. I want to know.”

Ganaka sighed. “In that case, you’d better have some of my bread. I was going to save it until you were out of sight.” He reached into his shawl and pulled out a large round roti, or flat bread, folded into quarters. He ripped off half for Gautama, but not before blessing it. “I see myself in you,” the older monk began. “I left home after my wife died. I was a vendor of ghee and spices in a village, never rich enough to own a proper store but not poor either.”

“And you were devout?”

“Oh, yes. Raised by a strict father who sent us to the temple for lessons as soon as we could walk. As a child I believed. Even when my dear Bhadda died in so much pain, moaning pitifully for her suffering to end, I believed. I gave away all my earthly possessions, and with the blessing of the priests I set out on my journey.”

“I think you’re still devout,” said Gautama. “You bless your food. Even when no one is watching, I imagine.”

“Habit,” the older monk said curtly. “Anyway, the road is a hard life. I went to visit the forest ashrams, eager as a bridegroom the night after the wedding. I sat at the guru’s feet and waited, mouth open like a gaping fish. That’s why I see myself in you. You want them to drop their wisdom into your gaping mouth. You’re probably a philosopher. No offense, but

I can tell by your accent that you never sold rubbish from a stall in the open bazaar.”

“I can’t disagree,” said Gautama diplomatically, caught between smiling at the older monk, who clearly had been dying for someone to talk to, and worrying about the tale of disillusion that was about to unfold.

Ganaka tore off a chunk of roti with his yellow teeth. “They’re shameless, these gurus. The garbage they spew as truth! Do they think we’re fools? They must, as I found out the hard way. I took some of the younger disciples aside and joked with them a bit. Little stuff. Does this guru get paid by the yarn, like a wandering storyteller? Does he think you can feed cows on moonbeams? Next thing I knew, I got thrown out bodily, like I came to steal their shoes. Hypocrisy.” His voice trailed off mournfully as he ran out of spleen. “Moonbeams and hypocrisy.”

“What did you decide to do?”

“I couldn’t go home. I’d given almost everything to the priests, and they don’t give back. But you’ve got some sense, you could see that I’m still devout. I pray, and I have a circuit of householders who feed me and let me take refuge from the storm.”

“Pardon me, but aren’t you simply waiting to die?” asked Gautama.

Ganaka shrugged. “It’s a life.”

Before Gautama could pose another question, they heard a commotion up ahead. A man was screaming curses, a woman was crying. Gautama’s steps quickened, and when he rounded the next curve he saw what the trouble was. A laden bullock cart going to market had run off into the ditch. Several bags of grain had spilled out. A woman was crouched on the ground trying to scoop up the scattered grain with her hands, while over her stood her furious husband.

“Are you an idiot? You’re putting dirt back in the bags. Stop bawling!” he shouted. He began to beat her about the

shoulders with his bullock goad.

Gautama came toward them. When he saw a monk, the husband sullenly lowered his stick. “Is your animal hurt?” Gautama asked, noticing that the bullock, which was old and blind in one eye, had fallen onto its front knees.

Without answering, the man began to apply the goad heavily to the bullock, who lowed mournfully as it struggled to regain its footing. Out of panic it pulled the wrong way and tilted the cart farther over; more bags spilled out, and the woman began to weep loudly. Beside himself now, the man couldn’t decide which one to beat next, the bullock or his wife.

“Wait,” begged Gautama. “I can help you.”

“How?” the husband grumbled. “If I have to give you a bag of rice, you’re cheating me.”

“Don’t think about that, just try to calm down,” Gautama coaxed.

Once he got the husband to back off from his rage, Gautama helped him free the bullock from its yoke and unload the cart. Then he and the man shouldered the cart from the rear and with considerable grunting and groaning rolled it out of the ditch. While they sweated in the hot sun, the wife sat in the shade holding the bullock’s tether and fanning herself with a palm leaf.

“There.” Gautama stood back after the last bag of grain had been put back into place.

Without a word the man got into the driver’s seat. “Are you coming or not?” he said sourly to his wife.

She put her hands on her hips. “Why? So I can go home with a man who beats his bullock into a ditch and is so stupid it takes a monk to show him how to get it out again?”

Gautama could see that the man wanted to hit her again with the goad, but his shame kept him from doing it in front of a holy man. He bit his lip while his wife climbed into the cart, flashing a contemptuous smile at the young monk. The cart

began to trundle off. Over his shoulder the man said, “Whatever rice you can pick out of the road is yours. Namaste.”

Gautama turned around to find Ganaka standing a dozen yards away laughing, and he was clearly laughing at him. “How long have you been standing there?” Gautama demanded, feeling the blood rising to his face.

“The whole time,” said the older monk nonchalantly. He was chewing a stem of sour grass he’d plucked from the roadside.

“Is there a stream nearby? I need to wash my face,” Gautama said curtly. There was no point, he thought, in asking why Ganaka hadn’t helped or if he had heard of the monastic vow of service. The older monk led the way to a fresh rivulet in the forest. Gautama poured water from his begging bowl over his head and shoulders while Ganaka watched, squatting on his heels.

“Those people didn’t love you for what you did,” he pointed out.

“I didn’t expect them to,” Gautama replied. The stream was shallow enough that the water he poured over his back felt as warm as bathwater. His tense muscles began to relax.

Ganaka said, “If you didn’t want them to love you, at least you wanted gratitude. You’re just too proud to admit it. And angry that I laughed at you. Imagine, here you are being a saint, and a monk, no less, ridicules you for it.”

Hearing the truth stung, but Gautama was too exhausted to work up heavy resentment. Instead he said, “Was I ridiculous in your eyes?”

“Why would it matter? A saint has to rise above ridicule. Maybe I was trying to teach you that.”

“Are you my teacher now? I thought you hated teachers.” Gautama knew that he had let childish pique creep into his voice, but he didn’t care.

He expected Ganaka to keep on mocking him, but the older monk's voice grew suddenly serious. "I'm part of the world. If you want a teacher, turn to the world."

Gautama stepped out of the water, feeling cooler but still sore with the sense of having been badly used. "The world's wisdom is contained in you? Congratulations."

"Not all the world's wisdom, but a piece of it. The piece you need to hear," said Ganaka calmly.

"And what is that?"

"Are you free enough of anger to listen?" Ganaka asked. He met Gautama's stare. "I didn't think so." He sat under a tree and watched Gautama as indifferently as he had watched the husband and wife in trouble. Gautama could have walked away, but after a moment he felt settled enough to sit down beside the older monk.

"Everything you say is true," he admitted.

"Only it shouldn't be. That's your position, isn't it? That when you act like a saint, you should be loved, and whoever sees you doing good works should be inspired to join you."

"All right, yes," said Gautama reluctantly. "What's your position? That you can be my teacher by standing around and letting me do all the work?"

"There was no work to do."

"I think there was," Gautama protested.

"Then tell me where I'm wrong. The man would have calmed down eventually and figured out how to unyoke his animal and empty the cart. He and his wife were strong enough to push the cart out of the ditch, and if they weren't, they could walk back to their village and get help. So by helping them, you kept them from helping themselves."

"Go on."

"If you thought you were preventing violence because the man stopped beating his wife, all you really did was shame

him. He will not only resent you for that; he will beat his wife extra hard tonight to make a point. He is master, she is slave.”

“And no one should try to show them a better way?”

“Maybe, but why should it be you? They had parents and priests who taught them right from wrong. They must know families where the wife isn’t beaten every time the husband loses his temper. Or maybe they don’t. Why should it be up to you? You’re a wandering beggar,” Ganaka pointed out.

Gautama was too tired to argue in the face of the older monk’s certainty. “I’m sorry you feel that way,” he mumbled.

Ganaka laughed with a hint of scorn. “You can do better than that. I can tell what you’re thinking. You’re highborn, so that makes you right. No question about it.”

“Do you always goad people like this?” Gautama asked, resolving not to make himself the butt of this irksome cynic.

“Is there any other way to learn?” Ganaka replied. “If you don’t want the world to have more shame, helplessness, and slavery, stop doing what you did today. All you did was increase it.” He got to his feet, as indifferent as if they’d been talking about the possibility of rain, and looked around for the shortest way back to the main road.

“Thank you for the bread, and the company,” Gautama said, forcing the words out.

Ganaka shrugged. “I may not be enlightened enough to suit you, my idealistic lad. But I’m far from being a fool. Don’t pretend you’re a saint. Experience tells me that they might not even exist.”

THE OLD KING mourned the day he saw his son ride out the gates of Kapilavastu, but he didn’t send guards to break into the Shiva temple and arrest the high Brahmin. The writing had been on the wall a long time before their plan finally failed. Canki realized that fate had turned against him, and he decided

to appear in the king's chambers one morning unannounced. He bowed without prostrating himself on the floor.

"I hope you don't have the gall to try to console me," Suddhodana grumbled. He had taken to sleeping late, and more often than not there was a young courtesan on the pillow by his side, the only consolation Suddhodana wanted these days.

"I'm only a priest, bringing the king's wishes before the gods," Canki said.

"I had only one wish, and you failed to make it come true. Your presence is distasteful to us. You should stay home."

They had hatched their conspiracy almost thirty years earlier, and Suddhodana wasn't one to look backward. He placed little faith in the promise that Siddhartha would return. "Return as what?" he said. "He'll never come back a king." The last part he didn't voice aloud to anyone, just as he didn't voice a secret intention he had, to name Devadatta as his successor. The notion had come to him in a dream. He often revisited old battles in his dreams, but not as he had fought them. Instead he was a wanderer among the dead.

Night after night Suddhodana saw himself asleep in his tent, still dressed in armor. He would wake up feeling stifled, suffocating for air. He would throw aside the tent flap, and scattered around him in the moonlight would be bodies, thick on the ground in poses of agony. He didn't weep over them; he hated them for troubling his peace.

However, this dream was different. He wandered the dusty field listlessly, head bowed. He came across a shallow grave. A body lay faceup, arms crossed over its chest. A cloud passed away from the moon, and he recoiled to see Siddhartha's corpse. A cry erupted from his chest, and Suddhodana leaped into the grave. He embraced the corpse, which was horribly cold. Suddhodana was wracked with sobs, so strongly that he was sure it would wake him up. Instead, the corpse moved. Suddhodana clutched it tighter, praying that his own life could seep into his son and revive him.

The corpse's head was beside his ear, and a voice said, "The prince is not the king." These were Siddhartha's words, and the moment they were spoken Suddhodana woke up in a cold sweat, but not before he got an instant's glimpse of the face again, which melted into dust.

He turned now to Canki. "You've been released. That's why I'm not going to kill you," he said.

"Released?"

"From our plot. I'm not heartless. I know what I've done, to my son and to all those people who suffered."

Canki had never heard the king talk this way; remorse wasn't in his nature. In fact, the high Brahmin had intruded in the royal chambers to remind Suddhodana that his son still had a great destiny ahead of him.

"You must have another plan. I will aid you however I can. I sense that you've found a ray of hope. True?"

Suddhodana gave a derisive snort. "So, you're not in your dotage after all. I thought priests softened when they saw heaven coming closer." He didn't wait for a reply. "What if Devadatta is king? Do we trust him?"

"Is that really necessary?" Canki said coolly. After Sujata's disappearance Devadatta had fallen under a cloud, yet he might be a necessary tool, and for that reason the king hadn't banished him.

"Explain yourself," Suddhodana demanded.

"The boy came here as a prisoner. He turned into a schemer. You have no idea if he really loves you or simply fears you. For myself, I don't think anyone could find out the truth. But it doesn't matter. What matters is ambition. If you promise Devadatta the throne, two purposes will be served. You will put out the fire of his hatred. And you will give your kingdom to someone as vicious as you are."

Heaven had to be close indeed for anyone, let alone a Brahmin, to risk those last words. Suddhodana looked at

Canki, who had lost much of his imposing bulk. His haughtiness seemed to have shrunk with his body.

“You call it vicious, I call it being strong,” Suddhodana said.

Canki and the king bent their heads together, rethinking every aspect of the new plan, mulling over every possible point where it might go wrong. Conspiracy was their only bond, and now that new blood flowed into it, the king felt alive as he hadn’t for a long time.

SUDDHODANA WOULD NEVER KNOW if a demon or a god had sent him his prophetic dream. But a demon wanted Devadatta to be king. Of that there was no doubt. For almost ten years Mara had been bored by mortal affairs. He had watched Devadatta and Siddhartha like twin horses trying to break the yoke that bound them. He hated the way humans clung to indecision.

Devadatta had grown more violent over the years. His night excursions into the poor parts of the city ended as often in murder now as in rape. Since he was protected by caste, no one dared assassinate him for fear that they would be damned in the afterlife. So the common people set up watch, and when Devadatta’s horse was spied, or if he showed his face in a tavern, word spread quickly and doors were locked. He found himself lurking deserted streets, and in time his great problem wasn’t his obsessive urge to hurt—it was loneliness.

His only escape these days was to go out riding, either to hunt deer or race his mount mile after mile until both rider and horse were totally spent. This reckless sport injured and crippled several fine horses, but it was the only way Devadatta had found to forget himself. One day soon after Siddhartha left to become a sannyasi—a decision Devadatta considered criminal for a prince of the blood but one that he rejoiced in as well, for now he had an opening, an opportunity to seize control of the kingdom—Devadatta had left the main road in

order to force his horse to gallop where the trees were thick, adding to the thrill of his excursion.

Suddenly he smelled smoke in the air. He stopped and rose in the stirrups, casting his eyes over the trees until he saw the thin wisp of a campfire. Normally he wouldn't have cared. Fires were set by woodcutters and other workers, never women. But Devadatta heard a faint whisper in his ear, and on impulse he rode toward the fire.

Sitting by the fire with his back turned to him was Siddhartha, and he hadn't become a monk at all. He was still wearing his princely robe and embroidered skirt. His cousin had simply run off for some secret reason. In the next instant, however, Devadatta's horse stepped on a twig with a loud crack. The man by the fire turned his head, and Devadatta saw that he was mistaken. The man smiled nervously, and his cracked teeth and stubbled beard betrayed that he was a beggar. Devadatta could see that he was roasting a dead parrot he must have scavenged on the forest floor.

"Friend, can I help you?" The man stood up, smiling anxiously.

"Don't call me friend," said Devadatta coldly. "Where did you steal those clothes? Did you kill someone for them, or are you with the dacoits?"

"Kill?" The man looked alarmed now as Devadatta slowly rode toward him. "I couldn't be no killer, or no dacoit, sir. As Your Worship can see, I'm all alone."

It was true that forest thieves always traveled in packs. "What if I believe you? You still have on royal clothes, anyone can see, filthy as they've gotten," said Devadatta, making his voice as menacing as he could.

The man started to strip Siddhartha's robes off. "You can have 'em, sir. I never been to court. I knew they was fine clothes, but I never suspected them of being royal. Not for a minute, I swear."

The poor man was too frightened to run and had no chance of escape if he did. Devadatta had already seen what must have happened in his mind's eye. A wretched beggar lying in a ditch. His fool of a cousin taking pity—hadn't he already wasted years ministering to the poor? No doubt he lifted the beggar up and gave him the clothes off his back. Devadatta shook his head.

“Stop trembling,” he said. “And put your clothes back on. You think I'd touch them?”

“Thank you, sir.” The beggar mumbled his gratitude and with one eye glanced over at the fire, where he had dropped the parrot. His meal had roasted to a crisp, and he looked pained.

“It's ruined,” said Devadatta, nodding toward the fire. “Forget it. I'll make sure you don't need to beg anymore.”

The beggar's smile would have turned to a look of puzzlement, but he had no time for that. It took a matter of seconds for Devadatta to draw his sword and even less, given his years of practice with the weapon, to chop off the beggar's head with one swipe.

That evening Suddhodana heard women wailing outside his rooms. Something in their cries was heartrending. This wasn't another funeral formality for an aged courtier. He opened the door to see every lady at court kneeling along the entire length of the main corridor.

“Out of my way!”

He strode through the mass of female bodies, bent as low as hummocks in a meadow, with little care that he was stepping on them. In the main courtyard of the palace the court men formed a dense crowd, some murmuring in low, grim tones, others shouting oaths and imprecations. The crowd was a thick, angry mass like a single creature. By now Suddhodana's blood was cold. It could only be one thing. The crowd parted when he was spotted, and all but the most senior advisers and generals prostrated themselves on the

cobblestones, which were still hot as cooking stones so soon after sunset.

“Where is he? Where is my son?”

Suddhodana followed the eyes of the men around him. Their gaze formed a path, and at the end stood Devadatta. He had dismounted. Over his tall horse, whose sides were panting from a hard ride, a body was draped. It took a second before the king recognized his son’s clothes hanging off the corpse. The head had been cut off, leaving a grisly stem.

Suddhodana recoiled in revulsion. He had no desire to come closer or to take a second look. He turned and put one foot ahead of the other until he had reached the security of his darkened rooms. The heat of the cobblestones seeped through his sandals. The old king felt it, and somehow his hot shoes stuck in his mind, the way trivial things often do, as the first thing he remembered on the long road of suffering that stretched ahead forever.

13

The moment Gautama stepped into the small clearing, he knew that he'd found what he was looking for. A crude thatched lean-to faced him from under the shade of an old tree. The shadows were deep, but he could see a hermit sitting in lotus position. There was no trail of footprints or telltale smoke in the air to lead Gautama to this place. He had been away from home for three months now, and he was an adept forest dweller himself. No longer did he wake up with a start in the middle of the night fearing danger from the snap of a twig. He could let his footsteps wander where they wanted to, and now here he was.

He crossed the small clearing and stood over the hermit, who could have been Asita—slender, wiry build, nut brown skin, thinning hair with a long beard. Gautama moved as silently as he could, and he didn't speak in greeting to the old ascetic, who made no motion, not even the flutter of an eyelid, to acknowledge his visitor. Finding the shade of a nearby tree, Gautama sat under it and folded his legs. For ten years now he had been meditating, and just as Asita promised, it had become his refuge from the outside world.

At first he had found it hard to settle down completely. As the scriptures say, the mind is like a runaway coach, and the driver never stops whipping the horses. But from inside the coach a voice whispers, "Please stop." At first the team and driver ignore the voice. It is very soft; it never insists. Over time, however, the voice wins obedience, and the driver and horses stop wildly galloping. Bit by bit they slow down until the mind is at rest. Thus Siddhartha learned a basic lesson: whatever can run can also stand still.

Gradually the tree shade moved away, and he began to sweat. He could see an orange glow in his eyelids and knew, if it was this near sunset, that hours must have passed. Gautama took a peek, but the hermit was still motionless under his lean-to. There was no guarantee that he possessed any wisdom or could be a useful teacher. But Gautama had promised himself that he would seek out someone like Asita. How can freedom be taught except by someone who is free?

Darkness descended, and still there was no sign of activity. Gautama got to his feet and headed toward a stream he'd crossed near the clearing. Stooping to drink, he realized that waiting could take longer than he'd thought. He collected some fruit from the trees and headed back to the clearing. He fashioned a bed of boughs and went to sleep. The hermit became a black outline against the nearly black night sky.

In this way three days passed. The hermit's ability to remain as still as one of the Shiva statues outside Canki's temple impressed Gautama deeply. His own body ached from the hours he had put in sitting and waiting for something to happen. He fidgeted, obeyed the call of nature, ate and drank when he had to. Like a force of nature, the wiry old man remained immobile. Once or twice Gautama gave a soft cough to make his presence known. On the second day he ventured to say "Namaste" in a quiet voice. On the evening of the third day, he walked over to the ascetic, squatted on his heels beside him, and said, "Sir?"

The hermit opened his eyes. "You talk too much," he said. His voice was clear and alert; the trance he was waking up from was no ordinary kind.

"Can you teach me?" Gautama asked, wanting to seize the moment before the hermit retreated back into his deep *samadhi* once more. But he was too late. The hermit closed his eyes, and soon the sun set. Gautama stretched out on the ground for the night, having no idea if he'd made any progress. Apparently he had. When he woke up the next morning the hermit was standing over him.

“Maybe,” the hermit said.

Gautama sprang to his feet. “What shall I do first?”

“Be quiet.”

The hermit went back to his place under the lean-to and resumed his meditation. Gautama suspected that he wouldn't open his eyes for another three days. It took four. In the meantime, however, the new disciple wasn't bored. Gradually he began to be filled with his teacher's presence. It happened invisibly. Gautama was obliged to meditate along with his master. Imitating the guru was the main path for a disciple: you ate when the guru ate, slept when the guru slept, listened when the guru spoke. Yet the greatest teachers, so Siddhartha had been told when he interrogated visitors to court, taught in complete silence.

Apparently Gautama had run into one of those, for whenever he closed his eyes, something new would happen. He found stillness, as before, but now it was vibrant and alive, as if a shower of sparkling white light were falling inside him. Its effervescence caused his body to tingle gently, a delicious sensation that made it effortless to sit in meditation for hours at a time. In between, when Gautama found that his limbs were too stiff and his body too restless to sit any longer, he pattered around the clearing, sweeping away debris, placing a gourd of water beside his master, gathering fruit and firewood for the night. He was eager to ask the hermit how he managed to enter a disciple and fill him with his presence. Then he remembered his master's rebuke about talking too much. On the evening of the fourth day the hermit surfaced from his samadhi.

His first word was, “Well?”

Gautama prostrated himself at the hermit's feet. He could have said, “I am satisfied,” but his gesture of obeisance was enough. His teacher had given him a taste of all that was to come, and when he said, “Well?” he meant, “Do you accept me?” The bond between a guru and a *chela*, or disciple, exists deep in the heart. Gautama had become so sensitized that this

one word, “Well?” said everything. It said, *This is how things will be. If you want praise and smiles, go to someone else. I’m not here to flatter you.*

The routine at camp was soon established. The disciple performed the small duties that kept the necessities of life going. Most of the time the two of them simply sat, facing each other across the clearing like two life-size icons abandoned by a sculptor in the forest. Then the face of Yashodhara began to appear in Gautama’s mind. She was smiling, and he couldn’t help looking at her smile. The scriptures give permission to meditate upon various divine images, so why not his wife? If love is divine, can’t a woman also be? Yet the moment Gautama fixed his mind’s eye on Yashodhara’s face, her body appeared, and it was not clothed. The young monk squirmed, praying that his master didn’t see the physical reaction this caused, which wasn’t his fault.

He fought his reaction. Meditating on arousal wasn’t in the scriptures. Yashodhara’s face changed; it began to mock him. Her hands moved down her body. He fought harder. Perhaps if he focused on the purity of his love for her. Gautama thought about the day he chose her to be his wife. She was sixteen, he was nineteen. He had given up on finding Sujata but was far from losing her memory. When it was announced that he was to be betrothed, eager fathers drove a long distance to present their daughters in faraway Kapilavastu. Nobles, princes, and kings of neighboring domains crossed the border with elaborate entourages of slaves and horses. Siddhartha sat on the ramparts looking down at the scene with Channa.

“If the interviews are too much for you, I can always take a few off your hands,” Channa said. Some of the younger girls were barely twelve; it wasn’t expected that he would live with them immediately—arrangements would be made. But delay was only temporary. Suddhodana couldn’t be put off.

“Choose a girl who plays with dolls, choose an old maid of nineteen,” the king said. “But you can’t walk away without choosing someone.” They both knew that the future of the dynasty was at stake.

On the ceremonial day when all the hopeful brides were assembled at court, Siddhartha entered the hall in the same elaborate coat and plumed red turban he had worn when he turned eighteen. Each girl was prostrate on the floor, and as the prince walked down the line, he would catch a fetching or shy glance, a glint in one eye that promised sensual delight, in another a darting shyness that spoke of innocence and even bewilderment. Only one girl didn't look up at him, keeping her veiled face to the floor. She made Siddhartha curious.

“A great day!” declared Suddhodana in a loud, jovial voice. But when his son walked into his embrace, he whispered in his ear, “None of your tricks. They're not here so you can pray with them.”

Siddhartha knelt. “I know my duty, father.” As he turned around, a chamberlain ran up and handed him a garland of gold necklaces. Siddhartha pulled out a strand and approached the first girl.

“You are very beautiful. Why do you wish to marry me?” he asked, lifting her from the floor. Her direct gaze told him she wasn't shy.

“Because you are kind and good. And handsome.” She gave him a seductive look, one that was well practiced. Siddhartha knew it was called “the assassin's knife” in the manuals of love that noble girls were given to read. He bowed and handed her the gold necklace. He returned a smile that was gracious, but Siddhartha wasn't practiced at hiding his feelings, and the girl knew she had no chance. Her father would be furious.

To the second girl he said, “If anyone could be even more beautiful, it's you. Why do you want to marry me?”

The second girl had kept close watch on what happened to the first. She said, “To give you sons as magnificent as yourself.” Her voice had the ring of sincerity, but Siddhartha suspected that she was simply better trained. The love manuals taught that a man must always feel that he is making his own decisions while at the same time being carefully manipulated.

If a woman was skillful, and applied eros when it was useful, he wouldn't even know what was happening. Siddhartha bowed and handed the second girl a necklace. She put it on with a haughty toss of the head as he moved on.

The king felt anxious. "He doesn't like any of them," he whispered to Canki.

The high Brahmin was unruffled. He knew that discrimination can hold out against desire only so long. "Patience, sire. He's a young man. When peaches are ripe, no one leaves the market without buying one." But nothing about Siddhartha's manner looked promising by the time he had reached the last girl. She looked up at him but didn't remove her veil.

From behind the girl, her father nudged her with a fierce whisper. "Go ahead. Get up and look at him!" She took a moment before rising. Now Siddhartha remembered who she was. The one girl who had made him curious.

"I cannot tell if you are beautiful," he said. "What's your name?"

"Yashodhara."

"May I see you?"

She kept her veil on. "Is my appearance the only thing that would make me worthy? If so, don't look at me. My face might conceal a false heart."

Siddhartha smiled. "A good answer. Then tell me: Why do you wish to marry me?"

"I'm not sure yet. I don't know you, and you haven't made any pretty speeches, the way you did to the others."

Siddhartha was intrigued by these words, but he also had to see her. He lifted Yashodhara's veil. She wasn't beautiful in the way the first girls had been, modeled from the pages of the love manuals. But instantly he knew how he felt.

"You're wonderful, because you were made to be loved."

Up to this moment she had had the advantage, but now Yashodhara blushed. “That was a pretty speech, but too short for me to make up my mind. My father will be so disappointed if I come away empty-handed. Can I have a necklace?”

She held out her hand and Siddhartha frowned. “Was that a good enough reason for you to come here?”

She replied, “Sire, I live in the deep woods, four long days’ journey from here. My father is very anxious that I marry you. But a gold necklace can feed a hundred of my starving people, those I left behind.”

“Girl!” her father rebuked.

Siddhartha held up his hand. “It’s all right.” He bowed to Yashodhara. “With your first words I found that you are honest, and now I find that you are also kind. What more can I wish for?” He took her hand and led her to kneel before the king as the hall rang with cheers. There was no need for a long betrothal. Just as Siddhartha said, Yashodhara was a woman who existed to be loved, and their union was as real as Suddhodana’s with Maya. Yet it was known to both of them, if to no one else in the world, that Yashodhara had wept inconsolably on their honeymoon night.

Siddhartha turned red. “If I was clumsy or did something wrong—”

She put a finger to his lips. “No, don’t.”

“Then why are you so unhappy? An hour ago you seemed to be in love.”

“An hour ago I didn’t realize that you are going to leave me one day.”

He smothered her with kisses to reassure her and chided her gently about being a superstitious girl like the maids who ran to the temple for a good luck charm if they spilled the milk. Yashodhara’s words were never repeated between them. Ten years wasn’t enough to erase the memory, however, and when it came to pass that her husband did decide to leave her, Yashodhara was crushed by seeing her premonition come true.

All these memories danced before Gautama's mind along with the image of his wife. The recollection of her sorrow was the only thing that enabled him to defeat his arousal. Gautama's back slumped, and he wondered for the first time since finding his master if abandoning his family wasn't an unforgivable sin.

Suddenly Gautama felt a stinging pain on one cheek. He opened his eyes to see his master standing over him, hand raised. Sharply the hand came down and slapped the other cheek.

"Why did you do that, sir? What did I do to offend you?"

The old hermit shrugged. "Nothing. You smelled like a man who sleeps with women. I knocked the stink off."

This incident stuck in Gautama's mind for two reasons—because it permanently banished any images of Yashodhara from his mind, and because it was the most words in a row that the hermit had spoken. But his master wasn't setting a precedent for garrulousness. Weeks passed, the monsoons came, and he said not another word. This became a time of great peace for Gautama. One day he went for firewood but couldn't find any that wasn't soaked from the rains. He recalled a cavern formed by fallen boulders where perhaps some dry logs might have lodged.

Walking through the woods, he felt the rain coming down, but the monsoons were warm and he was toughened by months of exposure. His body didn't shiver or his mind complain. Yet as he kept walking, Gautama noticed that he started feeling chilled, and a hundred yards farther on he was shaking badly. By the time he reached the cavern of boulders, he felt quite uncomfortable and his mind was attacking him mercilessly. *Go home. This crazy master is going to turn you into his slave or a crazy recluse like himself. Run!* It was as if he'd been taken back to his first day on the road.

He found an armful of dry kindling, and when the rain abated he headed back to camp. Now the process reversed itself. The closer he got to the small clearing, the better he felt.

His mind calmed down, and the shivering in his limbs subsided. As he set foot in camp and saw his master again, perfect peace descended like a curtain over his whole being. Gautama stared at the old hermit in wonder.

“Mara.”

Gautama was startled. “What?”

“Mara is interested in you.” Gautama opened his mouth, but the hermit shook his head abruptly. “You know it’s true. You knew it before you came here.”

Gautama trembled, sensing that a gulf was opening up between himself and his master. He was surprised at how afraid this made him feel. “I haven’t thought of Mara in years,” he protested.

“And so you kept him away. For a time.”

The hermit breathed a deep sigh, as if he had to remind his body how to return to the physical world before he could say another word. A few agonizing moments passed. Siddhartha felt his heart sink. *If he can smell that I have a wife, what must a demon smell like?* he thought.

The hermit said, “Mara will keep away from me. He has no interest in feeding when the bowl is empty. You are different.”

“What interest could he have in me?” asked Gautama.

“You don’t know?” The old hermit saw the look of bafflement in his disciple’s eyes. “There’s something he can’t let you find out. You must go beyond anything I can teach. That’s the only way to rid yourself of the demon,” his master said.

Gautama felt panicky. He bowed to the ground and seized the hermit’s gnarled feet. “At least tell me what I’m looking for.”

When he got no reply, Gautama glanced up to see that the old hermit had closed his eyes again and was far away. The disciple could barely sleep that night. When he woke up before

dawn he saw no dark outline against the night sky. His master had left. Grief overwhelmed Gautama, and yet deep down he wasn't completely shocked—his master could only do the right thing. That was their bond, and he would never betray it. At that moment leaving had been the right thing.

Gautama could have hung around camp for a few hours or perhaps a day to see if his abandonment was only temporary. But the storm in his heart and the return of despairing thoughts told him something definitive. His master had withdrawn his protection; therefore, their relationship had come to an end. Carefully the young monk tidied up the camp. He swept the ground and put a fresh gourd of water beside the place under the lean-to where the hermit sat. Then he bowed to the grass mat that had been his master's only throne and departed.

As it turned out, one shred of their relationship was left. As he trudged back to the main road several miles away, Gautama fell to musing. He saw the hermit's face and its look of pity. He heard his own desperate plea, "At least tell me what I'm looking for." The hermit turned implacable; he closed his eyes and refused to speak. Only this time the answer came silently in Gautama's mind.

There is one thing Mara can never let you find out: the truth about who you really are.

14

Gautama wandered down the road, his whole being churning with what the hermit had told him. Before he left his father's kingdom he had fought against Mara the only way he knew how—by trying to alleviate suffering and want wherever he could. Saints persevere even though the tide of suffering rolls back in despite their compassion. Mara had survived a lot of saints. What was one more?

But a strange new element had been added. The forest hermit implied that the demon was afraid of Gautama. But why? Demons are immortal; they can't be harmed physically. The riddle went even deeper. Gautama seemed to be the *only* person Mara feared.

These thoughts kept turning over in Gautama's head like wheels within wheels. How remarkable that in one day all the peace he had gained with his master in the forest had come undone. Why even seek a teacher if the same thing would only happen again? Gautama muttered the only words of consolation that he could remember.

"Surrender and be free."

"Did you say something, brother?"

"What?" Gautama looked up to see another monk about his age. "How long have you been standing there?"

"A few minutes. Care to join us? You've got a hungry look about you. There's a well-off farmer up the road, and his wife doesn't exactly hate me." The young monk spoke with a half smile and a sense of assurance. Gautama rose and followed him down the shade-dappled dirt road. At the next bend he

saw a patch of brilliant saffron flash through the trees, and when a small band of monks rounded the bend, the one Gautama was with waved to them. “Press on!” he shouted.

Gautama remained silent, melting into the group like a stray fish merging back into its school. The monk who had gathered him in was taller and older than the others. “Where are you headed?” he asked.

“East.” Gautama replied. There were big towns toward the east, and with large populations there would be more ashrams and all the famous teachers. He’d ask for help with his dilemma.

“Who are you?” the taller monk asked.

Gautama gave his name and the taller monk gave his: Pabbata.

“We’ll take you as far east as we’re headed,” Pabbata said. “You’ll be safer in a pack. These four scruffs are my cousins.”

“You all wanted to be monks?” asked Gautama with surprise.

Pabbata laughed sheepishly. “We all wanted to see more of life than a quarter-acre field that the jungle tries to take back every year.” His cousins nodded in assent. They began to chat among themselves, ignoring the stranger, and it didn’t take long for Gautama to take their measure. These were typical young men, all but Pabbata still adolescents, who needed to get out and stretch. They eyed every pretty farm girl who passed by on the road, joked with anyone who spoke their dialect, eagerly asked for news and gossip if they were lucky enough to meet a villager from near their home. Gautama didn’t have to close his eyes for the disguise of saffron robes to vanish.

“Have you found a Dharma?” he asked Pabbata when there was a lull and the group fell relatively quiet. He expected the taller monk to answer indifferently or with a joke, but his face lit up.

“I think about the Dharma night and day,” he said.

His cousins laughed, and one said, “He’s the serious one. We let him think for the rest of us.”

Pabbata’s spine stiffened. “Without a teaching, we’re no better than shiftless beggars.” This rebuke, mild as it was, irked his cousins, who sped up and left Gautama and Pabbata to trail behind. Gautama was glad to see them go.

Suddenly Pabbata asked, “Do you know why I stopped for you?”

“You seem kind.”

“Maybe. Fat lot of good that does you on these roads. No, it was something else. I was trudging behind my cousins, cursing the heat, thinking about someone I left behind, if you know what I mean. All at once I felt this cool breeze, and when I looked in the shadows, there you were. You understand?”

“No.”

Pabbata looked disbelieving. “You’re putting me on, right?”

When Gautama didn’t reply, the taller monk’s eyes widened. “You mean you don’t know? It was you. I felt your presence.”

Siddhartha could feel himself flush a deep scarlet. “That’s impossible. Let me assure you—”

“Assure me?” Pabbata guffawed. “I had a feeling you were high-caste. Look at you, even saying that makes you go red.”

Gautama was drawn to the tall countrified monk. He said, “I’ve been with a saint in the forest. I felt his presence. Every day, every minute. It made me—I don’t know what it made me.”

“Drunk, maybe. That type can throw you off your head, that’s for sure.” Pabbata stopped for a second and then replied, “So you must be a saint too. Like attracts like, isn’t that how it works?”

“Not in this case.”

Pabbata shook his head, frowning. “You shouldn’t talk about yourself that way. Karma is shy. It’s easy to drive the good kind away.” He sped up to rejoin his cousins. Gautama lagged behind, and after a moment he heard loud laughter and banter. He was tempted to fade back and lose the other monks, but he didn’t. Pabbata looked over his shoulder and saw Gautama a few yards behind them.

“Don’t be shy, princess!”

The jibe, like everything Pabbata said, was good-natured. Gautama could do worse than travel in such company. Maybe the next town or the next teacher could offer him some answer. And so the saffron-clad sojourners walked on together for several days. Gautama lightened the time between farmhouses by finding fruit and fresh water that the others couldn’t spy; in return, they were much more persuasive beggars and flirted with the country wives for extra roti and rice. “This one makes good mango pickle. It’s worth a kiss behind the barn,” one of the cousins said with a wink.

One morning Gautama had gotten up before dawn, as he was accustomed to do with his master, and meditated in the faint blue-gray light. He washed himself in a stream and shaved his beard with the sharp shell of a freshwater mussel. As he walked back to camp, he felt a strange sensation. After a moment he realized a cool breeze was tickling the back of his neck. The morning was already heavy with heat, and he stopped. He raised one hand and could definitely feel a cool current of air around his head. Gautama had felt such a sensation around his master without comprehending why.

Gautama turned his steps and headed back toward the main road instead of to camp. He hadn’t met a better person the whole time he’d been wandering. And yet he couldn’t stay now, not if it meant being turned into a false god.

Emerging from the thick jungle growth, Gautama saw that the main road was crowded with travelers. He ducked his head and kept as close to himself as possible. But he couldn’t help

becoming part of the passing parade. Farmers' carts were a constant sight, trundling to market and home again. There was the occasional merchant caravan, usually surrounded by armed guards to protect the precious bales of silk and spice stowed in a horse-drawn wagon.

Gautama regarded them all with troubled eyes. They were like phantoms to him, no longer made of flesh and blood. They were dream images that he could pass his hand through if they came close enough. As their bodies faded, he saw something else more clearly. Each person carried an invisible burden. The young monk was amazed that he hadn't seen it before. Everyone walked or rode with their lives on their shoulders, a pack of memories that spilled over with disappointment and sorrow. This one had never recovered from losing a wife in childbirth. That one was afraid of starving. That other one fretted over a runaway son who may have died in battle. And always there was the pall of age and sickness, the endless worry over money, the unceasing doubts about the future.

“Look!”

A small child, bolder than the others, pointed at Gautama, then jumped down from the cart he was riding in. He ran up and tugged at the monk's saffron skirt with a smile. The boy didn't beg for anything; he just held on to the skirt and walked beside Gautama. Instead of scolding him or calling him back, the parents nodded benignly.

“I have to find my brothers again,” mumbled Gautama. He removed the little boy's hand and turned around. Walking away, he could hear the child crying behind him, and this, as much as the stares people were giving him, distressed Gautama. He'd heard children crying like that many times, when there was no food or the kind Prince Siddhartha had run out of coins for them. But Gautama had given this child nothing and taken nothing away. Except himself.

Gautama found the path that had led him to the main road, and soon he was swaddled in the protective gloom of the jungle. The five cousins would still be in camp. They were

never eager to travel in the heat of the day. Once he found them, Pabbata looked puzzled over why Gautama had been gone so long, but he kept this to himself. Solitude was a monk's privilege, one of the few. Gautama had taken the precaution of gathering some mangoes on the way, which placated the other cousins in case they had questions to pose. He lay down under a tree, gazing up at the dappled light that filtered down and made small white circles on the forest floor. He couldn't find a way to fall asleep as the others dozed off.

Own nothing. Give everything.

It was all he could think about.

“DO YOU RECOGNIZE ME?”

Gautama lifted the sick man's head and brought a water gourd to his lips. The man had been unconscious when the novice monks, the *bikkhus*, found him. Only Gautama thought he was still alive. He ordered the *bikkhus* to put the body in his tent and leave the two alone. They obeyed without question. First, because wherever Gautama went, from camp to camp, ashram to ashram, he was revered. He had emerged from the forest only a year before, yet many of the novices whispered that someone like him, a man of stature and power, should be master, not a worn-out old yogi.

There was a second reason too. If the man they found in the forest actually was dead, Gautama might bring him back to life. Miracle stories swirled around him, and no amount of discouragement on Gautama's part could make them die down.

“Do you recognize me?” Gautama repeated when he saw the old man's eyes flutter and then open.

“I—I'm not sure.”

Hunger and dehydration had made the man's mind weak. He looked around the tent, baffled at how he had gotten there. Then his gaze returned to Gautama's face and stayed there. “Ah,” he said. “The saint.”

“That’s what you called me, Ganaka. But don’t worry. Didn’t you also tell me that saints don’t exist?”

Feeble as he was, Ganaka summoned a cynical smile. “You waited this long to prove that I’m wrong?”

His head fell back; he struggled with another wave of delirium. Ganaka had been found deep in the forest, sheerly by accident when the bikkhus were chasing down a deer with bow and arrow. “I didn’t ask for your help,” he mumbled. “It’s my life. Who are you to save it?”

“Weren’t you about to give it away?”

Gautama had sensed such a possibility. Someone as experienced as Ganaka didn’t just wander away alone unless it was to die. The careworn monk turned his head away and refused to answer.

“We’ll talk later,” Gautama said. He placed water and fruit beside the cot and departed. Outside the tent his eyes saw dozens of huts in the large clearing. It was spring, and the younger bikkhus were feeling the effects—they exercised, argued, talked in secret about girls they had left behind. Some missed home too much. Every day the weather was fair, a few more failed to show up for evening prayers. Spring had more power over them than God.

Gautama walked among the campfires. By now he had explored every city in the kingdom and those that lay far to the east, but he had avoided the temptation to set foot inside the gates of Kapilavastu. As the word spread and scores of villagers and farmers traveled out to find him and receive his blessing, some were from Sakya and remembered him. If they murmured “Prince” or “Your Highness” when they prostrated themselves before him, Gautama took no notice, gave no hint to acknowledge who he once had been. Four years had made Gautama into Gautama.

Of course he could still conjure up the old faces. But they didn’t return on their own anymore. In order to see images of Channa or Suddhodana, he would ask to see them. “Learn to

use your memories,” he told the younger bikkhus. “Don’t let them use you.”

Ananda, a monk around his own age of thirty-three, ran up. He looked vexed and excited. “Another miracle, brother. What should I do?”

Gautama frowned. “What marvel did I supposedly perform this time?”

“There’s a cripple just come to camp. Hobbled in on crutches, then he fell on his knees and called out your name. He gave a few twitches, and now he’s walking again.”

“Aren’t you impressed, Ananda? You’d think with all my powers I could prevent my feet from getting blisters when we walk down a rocky trail.”

Ananda was too exercised to smile. “He’s just one of those cheats who wants a free meal.”

“Don’t we give food to anyone? Even cheats?”

Ananda bit his tongue. No one was closer to Gautama in their travels, thanks to his sincerity about God and his total devotion to Gautama. Recently, though, the short, stocky Ananda, who exuded stubbornness as much as loyalty, had become like a sergeant or an aide de camp as more and more responsibilities fell Gautama’s way with the bikkhus.

“I think I know what to do,” Gautama said. He sat down by the central campfire on a rough-hewn bench. Whenever they stopped for any length of time the bikkhus bestirred themselves to build huts and stools and such from forest timber. “Feed him well. Then say that I need his crutches to help another lame man. If he hesitates to hand them over, tell him to come and personally tell me why. I imagine he and the crutches will both be gone in the morning.”

At last Ananda found a smile. “He’ll never hand them over. He needs them for his next miracle down the road.”

“I think so.”

Although he wasn't the senior monk, Gautama had been relieved of chores around camp. He attended to the guru's major affairs instead. "I wouldn't burden you," the guru said, "but you are cursed by your gift."

"And what is my gift?" asked Gautama.

"The bikkhus think you're their father."

"Shouldn't you be their father?"

The guru shrugged. "I already got rid of my curses."

This master's name was Udaka, and he was the second luminary Gautama had found in his wanderings. The first, who was named Alara, had been a quiet, reclusive scholar, a Brahmin but nothing like Canki. Alara paid no attention to caste. He immersed himself in the Vedas and wouldn't bother to eat unless someone placed a plate of food beside his study table. When he first walked in, Gautama immediately attracted Alara's attention. His head, bent close over a sacred text, whipped up, and his eyes squinted as if looking into a bright light.

Instead of saying hello, Alara asked a question. "Stranger, if the scriptures tell me to avoid violence, is it enough that I walk past a fight and not enter into it?"

Gautama, who was prepared to prostrate himself at the master's feet to beg for instruction, was taken aback. He opened his mouth to say, "Tell me the answer, wise one," but what came out instead was, "Merely avoiding violence shows virtue, but it shows much more virtue to help end the fight and bring the combatants to a state of peace."

"Ah." Alara looked pleased. He patted the rough plank floor next to him, signaling for Gautama to sit close by. He even shifted the small prayer rug that he occupied so that his new disciple would be more comfortable. The next two months were nothing like the silence Gautama had shared with the forest hermit. Alara was a *gyani*, or philosopher. He thought and he talked.

“What is the mind for if not to find God?” he said. “The scriptures assure us that this physical world is a mask, and yet the mask isn’t physical. It’s made of illusion, and illusion is created by the mind. Do you understand? What the mind has created, only the mind can undo.”

Gautama threw himself into a study of the Vedas, the ancient scriptures, and what Alara had said was holy writ. Every person has two selves, a lower self that is born of flesh and tied to the illusions of the material world, and a higher self that is eternal and unborn, with no attachments at all. The lower self craves pleasure, the higher self knows only bliss. The lower self cringes from pain, the higher self has never felt pain. If that was true, then Gautama had to find his higher self or be lost in the endless quicksand of the mind’s deceptions.

“You found me just in time,” said Alara. “Never mind that ordinary people are wasting their lives in foolish dreams of finding lasting happiness. To the ignorant, pleasure and pain appear to be different, but wisdom tells us they are the right and left hands of the lower self.”

For months Gautama focused on nothing else, praying, meditating, and studying to find a path to his higher self. It was not difficult to believe in the teaching of illusion, or *maya*, because he continued to see ordinary people as ghosts, weighed down with care and suffering. Alara also looked like a ghost, but there was no pain lingering around him. For his part, the old gyani had never met a pupil like this one, and every day he delighted in him more and more.

One day, however, a young man of about twenty came and sat beside the front door of Alara’s hut. He was thin, almost emaciated, and his face was one of the saddest Gautama had ever seen. As it happened, Alara stepped out of his hut just as Gautama was about to hand the young stranger a bowl of rice. With a swift, abrupt swipe, Alara knocked the bowl out of his hand, and the rice scattered on the ground. Before Gautama could speak, his master grabbed his arm and pulled him away.

“Don’t look back,” he said sharply.

Behind them Gautama heard the young man cry, "Father!" At this Alara's neck stiffened, but he kept his eyes straight ahead. When they were out of sight of the hut he said, "Yes, he's my son. I do not greet him or encourage him. You shouldn't either." Alara saw the baffled look in Gautama's eyes. "My lower self once had a family. They are of no concern to me, just as this whole world is of no concern."

"I understand," said Gautama, lowering his eyes.

"No, Gautama, I can see you don't. I have been on the verge of telling you that there's little more I can teach you. But a true gyani must live what he's learned. How can you hope to reach your higher self if you remain tied, even by the slightest thread, to this vale of illusion? Maya sets traps everywhere."

Gautama didn't argue. But he wondered, *How would the sad young man at Alara's door feel to know that he was an illusion, another trap to be avoided?*

Two days later Gautama came into Alara's room, but he didn't take his accustomed place on the floor beside him. The gyani didn't look up from the page. He said, "I'm almost sad that you're leaving. That's what you're here to announce, isn't it?"

"Yes."

It could have ended there, simply, without a rupture. But Alara's hand shook, and he threw down his scrolls. "Just who do you think you are?" he asked irritably.

"A disciple."

"And since when does the disciple dare to teach the master?" Alara still hadn't looked at Gautama, who could see the veins standing out in the old man's neck.

"I didn't mean to disturb you this way," said Gautama.

"Insolence! I cannot be disturbed. You haven't learned that by now?"

Gautama knelt on the floor without coming closer.

Alara was unable to disguise his cold fury now. “If I need a demon to shake my faith, I’ll call on a proper one, not a disciple who smiles and smiles, only to betray me.”

This outpouring of blame didn’t shake Gautama. He had lain awake thinking about how his master, for all that he knew about illusion, had fallen into a trap. The scriptures were his illusion. They led him to imagine that he was free just because he could describe freedom out of a book and think about it with his subtle mind.

“I didn’t come here to harm you,” said Gautama. “I no longer believe in the higher self. I wish that I could. But it seems nothing more than a fine phrase or an ideal no one ever attains. You are good and wise, but you became so by study—isn’t it the lower self that reads the Vedas?”

These words, intended to be mild, had the opposite effect. Alara hurled a scroll at Gautama’s head, then jumped to his feet, looking for a stick.

“Get out, scoundrel!”

Gautama longed to say, “Who is so angry with me right now? Your higher self?” But Alara’s eyes were bulging already. Gautama backed away quickly.

For weeks he had wandered on until he found Udaka, his next teacher. Udaka wasn’t a philosopher but a pure yogi, devoting his every moment to achieving divine union. Because he sat in silence most of the day, Udaka felt more like the forest hermit, yet he fathered the bikkhus around him every night and spoke.

“Some of you are new here, some have traveled with me for years. Which of you has met God?” he asked. A few of the older bikkhus, after some hesitation, raised their hands.

“You new ones, look around and pay attention. See those with their hands up? They are the greatest fools, and you must never listen to them,” said Udaka. Somebody gave a sharp laugh; the older bikkhus stirred uncomfortably.

“How can you meet God when God is invisible and ever-present?” Udaka asked. “If He is everywhere, you cannot meet God, and you cannot leave Him, either. So how many of you are seeking God right now, with all your hearts?”

This time a great many of the men sitting around the campfire raised their hands. “Take a close look at yourselves,” said Udaka. “You too are fools. I just told you that God is everywhere. How can you seek what is already here? If someone came up to you and said, ‘A thousand pardons, sir, but I am seeking this mysterious thing called air. Can you tell me where it is?’ you would mark him down as a fool, wouldn’t you? Yet you follow like sheep somebody’s word who told you that you must seek God.”

What Udaka taught instead was redeeming the soul, or *atman*. “Your soul is just as invisible as God, but it belongs to you. It’s your divine spark, hidden and disguised by restless desires. Your atman is always watching you, but you do not notice it. You notice your next meal, your next argument, your next fear. It is always drawing you closer to the divine, but you do not heed it. You heed a thousand desires instead. Be still and know your soul. Seek it, and when you meet your soul, seize it for yourself, because it’s worth far more than gold.”

Gautama, who had been disillusioned by the higher self, felt a sympathy for this new teaching. For one thing, it gave him time in seclusion, where he could meditate and sit in the cool silence that he considered his real home. Udaka knew that the other bikkhus held the new arrival in awe; they vied to sit next to Gautama because his mere presence deepened their meditations. The guru put Gautama on his right hand when the group next sat together, and this unspoken gesture was enough to raise him above even the most senior monks, who were not so holy that they enjoyed being displaced.

“Let them hate you, let them love you. It’s all a waste of time,” Udaka said indifferently. Gautama believed him. He’d grown up in a world torn apart by worse things than petty jealousy in an ashram.

“But if another monk hates me,” asked Gautama, “why can’t he see that he is being distracted from his purpose?”

“He might. His soul could send him a message,” Udaka said.

“But not always? He could go on hating me a long time, then.”

“Yes.”

Gautama felt a disquiet. “But if the soul is always loving, why doesn’t it tell him immediately not to hate me? What reason does it have to hold back?”

“You’re asking me to be wiser than the soul,” said Udaka, with a trace of irritation. “Don’t be so clever. I’ve never seen anyone think their way to heaven.”

Now Gautama knew what his disquiet was about. He had lost the forest hermit and Alara. If he kept on this way, Udaka would fall away next. Disciples without masters are like fallow fields where no rain falls. He couldn’t do without nourishment. Udaka knew this too; he gave Gautama a hard look. “You have something more to say? Perhaps you want to ask me about humility.”

“No.” Gautama kept his composure. “I wanted to tell you that I’ve been having a vision. My wife comes to me. She says that I deserve compassion. Can you tell me what that means?”

“Ignore it.”

Udaka said this without the slightest sign that he cared about such things. Gautama wouldn’t be put off, however.

“Master,” he said, “many of the disciples have left homes and women they love. Their children are forgetting their father’s face. Can’t a devoted wife be part of my soul?”

“No one belongs in your soul but you,” said Udaka.

“Then perhaps her image is a message. You said that the soul sends messages.”

“But it doesn’t send dreams. She’s the figment of an ignorant mind,” Udaka said curtly. “What if you caught a cold? Would you want me to tell you what the soul means when it sends you a cold? Get over her as you would get over any other disease.” Gautama’s master had never been married, and like many yogis he made a sour face whenever women were mentioned. Udaka’s revulsion bothered Gautama. *Does he imagine that women have no souls?* But the discussion was over. Gautama bowed and left without another word.

That night he returned to his tent, where he found Ganaka sitting up eating a bowl of millet gruel. “Why so worried, saint?” asked Ganaka, looking up.

“You must be feeling better.”

“Much.” Ganaka began slurping the last bit of gruel from the bowl. “I should be strong enough in the morning to leave.”

“Where will you go?” asked Gautama.

“Deeper into the jungle. I don’t intend to be found a second time.”

Gautama was shocked. “You’re going to try to kill yourself again?”

“Of course. It’s my Dharma.” Ganaka looked perfectly calm and serious, speaking without a trace of cynicism. “Strange, isn’t it? I have to eat to get the strength to go out and starve myself.”

“I can’t let you,” Gautama blurted out. He was so shaken that he wanted to pace back and forth. Instead, he forced himself to sit on the ground with his hands folded in his lap. His heart pounded.

Ganaka said, “There are two things even a saint can’t stop. One is being born, and the other is dying.” He waited for Gautama to protest. It was hard to miss who in the tent was calmer and more collected.

“Killing yourself is a sin,” said Gautama, then he stopped himself. Ganaka wasn’t a fool or ignorant of scripture. “Please

explain what you mean,” Gautama said.

Ganaka burst out laughing. “Excuse me, but I just can’t help myself, little saint. Look at you. You wanted to jump out of your skin when I told you what I’m going to do. But you didn’t. Oh, no, you controlled yourself. You know how a holy man acts, and I must say you’ve gotten it down. I wish I could train a monkey half as well.”

Gautama felt the heat creeping up his face. “That’s unfair.”

“Who cares? I’m going to die tomorrow. I can say what I want.” The strange thing is that Ganaka wasn’t speaking harshly; his tone toward Gautama was almost kind. “I once told you that you reminded me of my younger self. Has it occurred to you yet that I might be your older self?” Seeing the scowl that Gautama was trying not to show, Ganaka broke out into laughter again. “You’re like a traveling show. I can see at least five or six people fighting inside you. Quite a spectacle.”

“Stop it!” Gautama jumped to his feet and began pacing as anxiously as he’d wanted to since entering the tent.

“Good,” said Ganaka. “Even a cat is smart enough to thrash its tail when it’s disturbed. Most people aren’t.”

This show of implacable honesty caused Gautama’s heart to sink. “You’re making me so sad,” he said, half pleading.

“Then I’ll stop,” said Ganaka. “Wisdom is never sad, and you want one last word of wisdom, don’t you?” He stood up and placed his hands on Gautama’s shoulders to stop him in place. “Dharma is worthless unless it teaches one how to be free. I have listened to all the masters, read all the scriptures, bathed in all the sacred springs. I found freedom in none of them.”

“And killing yourself will set you free?”

“When all else fails, whatever is left must be right,” Ganaka said with serious simplicity. He let go of Gautama and turned away for a moment. “What is freedom, little saint? It’s the end of struggle. Is not death the same thing? I want to meet

God, but my efforts have failed. Not just failed, but made me more unhappy than when I was married and lived with a loving wife. I do not say your seeking is a fraud. Perhaps you must walk as many paths as I did before you reach this point.”

He turned back and fixed Gautama with a clear, unflinching gaze. “You can shed your tears now.”

“I won’t weep for you,” said Gautama mournfully.

Ganaka sat back down on the cot. It was very late, and he was ready for sleep. “I meant weep for yourself. Whatever I am today, you will be tomorrow.”

He lay down and turned his back on Gautama, who sat vigil for hours. He wanted to be awake in case one last plea would dissuade Ganaka when he woke up. But time stands still in the dark. The next thing Gautama knew he woke up with light in his eyes and his head lolling on his chest. He looked toward the cot with faint hope. It was empty.

15

One morning Ananda didn't find Gautama in his tent. Several days had passed since the disappearance of Ganaka. None of the bikkhus were told anything about him, and only Ananda learned the grim truth. In the vastness of the jungle there was no possibility of searching for him, wherever he had gone to die. Gautama was badly shaken.

“How can we believe in supernatural powers, Ananda? No power in heaven protected him, or even cared,” said Gautama. “Ganaka had fallen into despair, and I couldn't save him.”

“Why should it depend on you?” Ananda asked.

“Do you know who Buddha is?”

“No.” Ananda shifted with embarrassment.

“Buddha can protect people,” Gautama said.

“Better than this?” Ananda held up an amulet he'd been given as a baby by his parents, who purchased it at a temple with half a year's income from their farm.

“Yes, much better than that. Don't ask me how. I'm the last person who'd know. I should have protected Ganaka.”

Mention of Buddha puzzled Ananda, but he took heart that this god, even if he'd never heard of him, was helping his friend. That was how he understood Gautama's words. Ananda believed that the gods never let anyone out of their sight. It bothered him that Gautama didn't respect the gods anymore. Sometimes he spoke of God, who was like the soul of the universe or a spirit that permeated everything. As a child Ananda had been brought up to believe that the gods were

different faces of one God. But lately even that God was on shaky ground with Gautama.

“We can pray to Buddha together,” Ananda said. “Or I can make an offering in the fire tonight.” Perhaps that would lift Gautama from his gloom.

Instead of answering, Gautama closed his eyes. This was his way of getting out of reach. None of the other monks could go as deeply into samadhi, and when he was in this state, Gautama heard and saw nothing. Ananda departed, and then rain came during the night, turning the trampled ground of the encampment into a mud slick.

Thunder rumbled overhead. Ananda’s shawl was soaked and useless for warmth, but he pulled it close to fend off a growing disquiet. Every monk was pledged to serve the master, but he had pledged to serve Gautama. He had done this silently, in his own heart. To him, Gautama was already a great soul. He kept that to himself too.

Ananda frowned as he hurried through the rain to peer into all the makeshift shelters. When he was sure that Gautama was nowhere in camp, Ananda took a deep breath and knocked on Udaka’s door. Disturbing the master could result in something more physical than a rebuke. There was no answer, though, and Ananda turned back. After all, he had no proof that anything drastic had happened.

He was only a few steps away when the guru’s door flew open, and Gautama stepped out. He looked pale and drawn, and when he set eyes on Ananda, he could have been looking at a stranger. Ananda’s heart pounded.

“What’s happened?”

Gautama shook his head and walked past. He offered no protest, though, when Ananda followed him into his tent. The lowering gray skies made the interior oppressively dark. Suddenly Gautama had something to say.

“I have no faith anymore,” he said. “I’ll be gone by tonight. Dear friend, don’t try to follow me. I’ll come for you

when it's time. Be patient.”

Ananda's lip trembled. “Why can't I come?”

“Because you'll try to stop me, as I tried to stop Ganaka.” The comparison filled Ananda's face with alarm, but before he could say anything Gautama went on. “I'm not going to kill myself; don't worry. But something may happen, something severe.”

“You've told the master?”

Gautama shook his head. “Only that I'm taking a journey that may be long or short. If he lives by his own teaching, he won't sorrow over losing one disciple. If he gets angry, then I'm right to stop serving him. I'm only sorry to say good-bye to you.”

Heartsick, Ananda fell into a gloomy silence; the two sat in the gray light listening to raindrops pelting the roof of the tent. Gautama placed a comforting hand on his shoulder.

“There's no reason to keep secrets from you. I was brought a message,” he said. “A traveler came to camp this morning, and I stumbled across him in one of the huts. I knew from his accent that he was a Sakyan, so I tried to leave, but I wasn't fast enough.”

“Fast enough for what?”

“To not be recognized. The stranger threw himself at my feet and began to weep. I entreated him to get up, but he wouldn't. The bikkhus in the hut began to murmur and exchange looks. Finally the stranger looked up and told me that I was supposed to be dead.”

“Dead?” said Ananda. “Because you left everything behind?”

“Worse, much worse. I have a cousin named Devadatta. He's filled with jealousy and has always set himself against me. When I left home my fear was that he would gain influence at court. Now he has, and in the most terrible way.”

Gautama told Ananda what he had just learned about how Devadatta had found a beheaded corpse in the forest wearing Siddhartha's robes. "Everyone believed him. The head was never found. Probably Devadatta committed the murder himself. He's capable of it." Gautama's voice died away mournfully. "I caused this disaster. Everyone I loved has been plunged into suffering."

"But it's a fraud," Ananda protested. "Send a messenger home and tell them."

"If I do that, Devadatta will be arrested and executed. I didn't sacrifice my family's happiness for that. Killing him would make a mockery of my search. I have to push on. I haven't done enough."

"But they'll suffer even more to think you're never coming back," Ananda said.

Instead of persuading Gautama, this seemed to harden him. "The person they once knew is never coming back. If that's what they wait and hope for, then I might as well be dead."

Hard as he tried, Gautama could not conceal the anguish in his voice. Ananda reached out and grabbed his hand. "Go home, put everything back in order. I'm not brilliant like you, but if I caused so much pain to my family, I would consider it the same as betraying God."

This speech moved Gautama, but as he considered what Ananda had said, his face grew darker. "You're condemning me to a trap, my friend. I set my whole heart on meeting God. I abandoned everything for his sake. If that is the same as betraying God, my situation is hopeless. So is yours, and everyone's here."

There were more arguments that afternoon, more pleas from Ananda, but Gautama had made up his mind. The skies were so dark that they blended seamlessly into nightfall. Gautama didn't permit Ananda to keep vigil beside his cot until dawn; he recalled how much it had hurt when he woke up to find Ganaka gone.

“Before we part, I want you to understand something,” he said. “I was raised in a palace, but I was a prisoner there. I had only one friend, so I spent hours alone or with the servants. What most fascinated me were the silk weavers. I discovered them bent over their looms in a tiny upstairs chamber. The room was full of the smell of indigo and saffron. The weavers didn’t talk among themselves; all I heard was the clack of shuttles running back and forth.

“There was one old woman, stooped and nearly blind, who did something I couldn’t understand. If a thread snapped, she would unload her loom completely and start over again. I asked her why she destroyed a week’s work over a single thread. She answered me in a word: *karma*.

“Karma keeps good and evil in balance. Karma is a divine law. When the law is violated, however innocently, it can’t be undone. One snapped thread alters the whole design; one misdeed alters a person’s destiny.”

Ananda listened carefully, wanting to remember every word from Gautama in case they never met again. “So the thread of your life has been broken,” he said.

“I thought it broke the day I left home. But I was naive. When I ended as Siddhartha, his karma continued to follow me. I feel as troubled as the day I left my wife and child a year ago. My hunger is for freedom, but the trap keeps closing tighter. Instead of attacking me directly, the demons sow discord everywhere around me. There’s only one thing left to try.” Gautama had skirted the truth, that the demons actually feared him.

“But what are you going to do?” Ananda pleaded, trying not to think about how alone he would be after this night.

Gautama wanted to protect his intentions, but he relented a little. There was a good chance that he would fail, and if that happened he would return home, not try to find the next guru. “Death has been stalking me since the day I was born. Eventually, no matter how hard I struggle, death will win—the hunter will kill his prey. But until then I have one chance to

turn the tables. If I move quickly, I may be able to kill death first. There's no other way, not if you want to be free."

IN A COUNTRY where villages were a day apart and travelers hugged a strand of road winding through miles of uncharted wilderness, Gautama could disappear into the green world and never be seen again. He set out to do just that, but it was too dangerous to go alone. Tigers don't mind eating idealists. Therefore, once he had left Udaka's camp behind, Gautama searched for more rigorous company. They would have to be monks. They would have to be willing not to talk for days or weeks at a time. Finally, they would have to push their bodies so far that only two choices remained: bursting through to freedom or perishing in mortal form.

Gautama made the same proposition to every monk he encountered: "Come with me and defeat your karma once and for all. Death is playing a game with us. It's a long game, but in the end the outcome is certain. Now's your only chance to defeat the pain and suffering that became your inheritance the day you were born."

These words were not strange; every holy man knew that the world was an illusion. The Vedas talked about it endlessly. But each monk who heard Gautama shook his head and looked away guiltily. "Your truth is too harsh, brother. I'm already living a life that ordinary people consider impossible. One day I will meet God, but if I try to force his hand, the only reward I may get is that I kill myself."

Some put it this way, some another, but no one braved Gautama's challenge. The more eloquent he grew, the more reluctant they became. "You look holy, but you may be a silver-tongued demon," one old monk reminded him. Eventually Gautama did find company, but not with his words. He ceased to eat more than a handful of rice a day. His body wasted away, and as his skin became a taut, translucent membrane clinging to his bones, Gautama acquired a glow. His hands, which he held out to bless anyone who asked,

looked larger, as did his deep brown eyes. This aura of saintly emaciation attracted five other monks, and once the band had gathered, Gautama led them upriver into the high country, where they found a large isolated cave.

It was a breathtaking place to suffer in. The sentinel peaks of the Himalayas ringed the far horizon. The air was crisp and cold as the first ice crust on a pond in winter. Gautama would wake up with supersensitive hearing. The faint air currents sweeping up the valley sounded like the breathing of the world. But rain made his bones ache, and thunder split his head open—it would throb with pain for days. For some months he and the five monks sat in their cave, doing the minimum of speaking, collecting roots for food, filling their gourds from a stream.

At first Gautama was worried that he was indulging himself, because no matter how austere the conditions, he loved the life of austerity. Perhaps too much. He tried sitting in the snow for hours to see if he could make his body hurt so much that it would give up all its hopes for pleasure. Day after day he repeated this, and then a miracle happened. Through the heavy falling snow he saw a stranger walking toward him. At first he was only a blurred dark shadow against the whiteness, but as he came nearer, Gautama saw that it was not a man who had braved the storm but the god Krishna. He had the most serene and beautiful face; his skin was a deep blue-purple that was all but black.

Gautama prostrated himself in the snow. “I have waited to meet you all my life,” he murmured. “I have abandoned everything for you.”

“I know,” Krishna said. His voice rang among the mountains like dull thunder. “Now go home and don’t do anything so stupid again.”

The god turned his back and walked away. At that instant Gautama woke up, shivering and starving. The skies were clear; there was no snowstorm. He returned to the cave but said nothing to the five monks. Maybe he’d only had a dream;

maybe Krishna was real. In either case Gautama was determined not to heed a delusion. But he needed some kind of sign that his war against death was succeeding. All he got was that his mind started to rebel. At first it complained of being lonely and afraid. It argued that Gautama was hurting himself needlessly. In this phase the voice Gautama heard in his head was whining and weak, like a small child's. As the weeks passed, however, his mind grew fiercely angry.

Gautama wanted to hasten its surrender, so the more his mind ranted, the more he deprived himself. He would sit naked all night on a frozen lake while his mind screamed in agony.

If you want to kill me, do it now, Gautama said defiantly. He didn't know who he was addressing, exactly. Perhaps not his mind but Yama, the lord of death. When dawn came and he wasn't dead, Gautama exulted. He had gotten his sign, because the cold and the elements had not defeated him. He was still alive, which proved that he was stronger than sun, wind, and cold.

Bolder now, he wanted to push further. More extreme austerities lay ahead. He could pile rocks on his chest or pierce his cheeks with sharpened sticks. There were legendary yogis who tore their own arms off and threw them into the fire. But the five monks resisted. They had been given no signs of their own. Gautama knew that he had to preach conviction into his brother monks. Otherwise, he would open his eyes one day after a cruel austerity and find that they had vanished.

"You doubt my methods, don't you?" he said.

"Yes," said the eldest monk, who was named Assaji. "If you could see yourself, you would be frightened. Why do you think that inviting death is the way to defeat it?"

"Because when everything else has failed," said Gautama, "whatever is left must be the answer. I've done nothing yet to earn your respect, but believe me when I say that I have tried everything to become free. I learned the Dharma of the higher self, but I never met my higher self or heard a word from it. I

learned the Dharma of the soul, which was supposed to be my speck of the divine, but no matter how blissful I might feel, the time always came when I was overwhelmed once more by anger and sorrow. Much the same must be your experience.”

The five monks said nothing, which Gautama took to be assent.

“In time I concluded that my struggles could last a lifetime, and to what end? I will still be a slave to karma and a prisoner in this world. What is this karma that visits us with so much suffering? Karma is the body’s endless desires. Karma is the memory of past pleasure we want to repeat and past pain we want to avoid. It’s the delusions of ego and the storm of fear and anger that besieges the mind. Therefore, I have resolved to cut karma out by the roots.”

“How? You think you know something that no one else knows?” Assaji asked. His rail-thin body already showed the effects of years of austerity.

“Myself, no. But you live the ascetic’s life. Haven’t you already spent years sitting in silence, repeating your prayers, contemplating images of the gods, reciting a thousand and eight names of Vishnu?” The eldest monk nodded. “Has any of it made you free?”

“No.”

“Then why should you continue to do more of what doesn’t work in the first place? The temple priests taught you how to reach God—priests who have not found freedom either, but who claim title to the holy teachings the way a farmer puts a brand on cattle.” Gautama had eaten nothing for days and barely slept. He wondered briefly if he sounded delirious.

One of the younger monks interrupted. “Tell us your way.”

“On the road I met an old sannyasi named Ganaka, and he told me something important. *Let the world be your teacher.* I couldn’t understand what he meant at first, but now I do. Every experience that traps me is a worldly experience. The

world is seductive and hard to interpret for what it really is. Yet this world is nothing more than desire, and every desire makes me run after it. Why? Because I believe it's real. Desires are phantoms, concealing the grinning face of death. Be wise. Believe in nothing."

It took many nights around the fire, but Gautama and the five monks came to an agreement. They would give their bodies nothing to live for in the world, no desires to fulfill, no cravings to become a slave to. They would sit like statues facing a wall, and no matter how many desires arose, each one would be coldly turned away. "Even if we are tied to our karma by ten thousand threads," said Gautama, "we can break them one at a time. When the last attachment is gone, karma will be dead instead of us."

He believed every word. Perhaps the five monks didn't, but they followed him. They sat like statues facing a wall and waited. Gautama was so fervent that he expected to reach his goal soon. Assaji wouldn't commit himself. "Unhappiness is born of expectations that don't come true," he reminded his brother monk. "Even to expect nothing can be a trap."

Gautama bowed his head. "I understand." But this gesture of humility disguised the fire he felt inside. In legend, other yogis had found immortality. They were great aspirants, and Gautama saw himself as nothing less. He chose a spot away from all shelter, sat down on a patch of rocks without clearing them away, and waited.

"**IF YOU MUST GO**, then go. I don't need a reason," said Assaji. He looked on Kondana with mild eyes that held no reproof. Kondana was the youngest of the five monks, but he had proved the toughest in the end.

"You already know my reasons. Look at him," Kondana protested. He pointed at a gnarled carving lying on the jungle floor, which was so close to looking like weathered wood that at times he had to remind himself that it was actually a living person—Gautama.

“I can’t stay and watch him kill himself,” said Kondana. “It’s like watching a corpse decay while it’s still breathing.” He had already stayed longer than three of the five monks. None were impatient. Since vowing to follow Gautama, they had pursued enlightenment for five years.

“He never moves anymore. I wonder where he is,” said Assaji.

“I think he’s in hell,” Kondana said mournfully.

The years of austerity had caused many things to happen. They had all gone through experiences in meditation that they never dreamed possible. Assaji himself had visited the home of the gods. He had watched Shakti, the sinuous consort of Shiva, dance for him, a dance where every step shook the worlds and the tinkle of ankle bells turned into stars. He had conversed with the greatest sages, like Vasishtha, who had been dead for centuries. Only Gautama never told such tales, and after winter settled in among the Himalayan peaks, it was a matter of survival to force him to find a place where they could be more protected. Reluctantly Gautama agreed, but only on the condition that he would continue his austerities and that the five monks would make no contact with other human beings.

An emaciated man whose skin has toughened into cracked brown hide and who has subsisted on a tenth of the food given to a newborn baby is not a sight for ordinary eyes. Some people would consider him a fraud, others a madman. The superstitious few would call him a saint. “I do not know who I am anymore,” Gautama said. “But I am blessed, because it has taken me only five years to know who I am not.”

Now Assaji walked over to Gautama and with Kondana’s help set him upright again. He had fallen over during the night, and these days he was lost in a samadhi so deep that nothing registered from the outside world. It was up to the other monks to feed him by opening his mouth and placing a handful of chewed rice in it. They carried him to the river to bathe him and moved him out of the worst of the searing sun. All this

made it appear that Gautama was helpless and paralyzed. But Assaji knew that appearances were deceiving. Gautama was on a quest the likes of which went back almost before time.

Kondana put on his sandals and tucked some dried berries into the corner of his shawl. “Will you come?” he asked Assaji.

“No.”

“You still think he has a chance—he might succeed?”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

There was nothing more to talk about. Kondana bowed down before Gautama and placed a pink wild orchid at his feet in reverence. He no longer felt guilty over losing hope; he was too exhausted to feel much of anything. As he left camp, Assaji touched him on the shoulder.

“When the time comes I’ll send for you. The five of us should carry the body back to his people.”

That was the last word Assaji said or heard for the next three months. Spring came, and every day brought a shower of creamy white blossoms falling from the sal trees that blanketed the northern forest. Gautama had not altered. At times he showed more signs of life than at other times. Assaji would hear him at night walking out of camp for the call of nature, but that was rarely. The water level might dip in the gourd Assaji placed by his side.

What eventually broke was Assaji’s own body. He got sick alone in the jungle; for all he knew it was a sign. Wrapped in his shawl, he suffered the delirium of fever for five days and nights. When the fever broke, he shivered with cold sweat. Slowly his body returned to health, but with it came an unexpected change. Assaji grew hungry again. He craved a real meal and would scour the jungle floor for a dead parrot to take back and cook.

If I am reduced to unwholesome food, my quest is over, he thought. He wasn’t willing to sink to a subhuman level, no matter how enormous the goal of enlightenment might be. He

decided to tell Gautama. One morning he crouched in front of his motionless brother, wiping away the dirt from his face with water from the gourd.

“I’m going,” he said. Gautama showed no signs of hearing him. “I must think about my soul. If you die and I let you, my sin is as great as murder. You shouldn’t be responsible for that. I’m ashamed to speak of sin to someone like you, but there’s no shame in it if you decide to come with me.”

Assaji’s guilt made him feel that he’d said too much already. Like the others, his faith had been worn down too far. Assaji lingered around camp a few more days. He piled fruit next to Gautama and a week’s supply of water. How strange that this immobile icon should still be alive and that behind his mask he was fighting such a huge battle. *Face the wall like a statue and give them nothing.* Assaji remembered Gautama’s rallying cry, but he couldn’t follow it anymore. He left camp before dawn without a sound.

Gautama didn’t hear him depart; he had heard nothing since he became aware—and then only at the farthest edge of his mind—that Kondana was gone. It didn’t matter. He had come to realize that he was walking the path alone. Two journeys had to be made without companions: the journey to your death and the one to enlightenment.

In his meditations he had arrived at heaven before the others, but he said nothing about it. There was dazzling beauty; golden celestial beings materialized all around him, but then he took a route the other monks would not. Gautama turned his back on the celestial beings. “I’ve already known pleasure. What good does it do me to feel more?”

“This is heavenly pleasure,” the celestial beings said.

“Which I can enjoy forever only after I die,” said Gautama. “Therefore it’s as good as a curse.” He walked away and asked to see more suffering.

Thus he arrived at the gate of hell, where Gautama saw the terrifying torments that lay beyond. But no demons came for

him. Instead he heard these words: “No sin brings you here. Do not pass.”

He entered anyway, of his own free will. *I’ve known fear*, he thought. *And fear is death’s chief weapon. Let me experience the worst torment, and then fear will lose its hold over me.*

The phase of hellish torment lasted a long time because every morning his broken bones and flayed skin grew back. “Where is Mara?” Gautama asked. “I need to see the worst that he can do too.” But for some reason Mara hung back and never appeared. Gautama wondered if this was a trap, but after a while the torments became routine, and his mind grew bored. One morning the demons failed to appear, and then the scenes of hell disappeared, giving way to dark, motionless silence.

Gautama waited. He knew he had defeated every form of suffering he could imagine. His body no longer felt pain; his mind gave rise to not a single desire. And yet no sign came that he had reached his goal. Like an endless, calm night, the silence bathed him. Gautama decided to open his eyes.

At first there was only a dim sensation of being wrapped in a blanket, which after a time he realized was his body. He looked down. It was midday, but someone had positioned him under the jungle canopy where no sunlight ever penetrated. Surveying himself, Gautama saw two crossed sticks. Legs. Two dried monkey paws. Hands. He noticed a pile of rotting fruit beside him, covered with ants and wasps. Suddenly he realized that he was thirsty. He reached for his water gourd, but the last inch of liquid inside was green and filled with mosquito larvae.

He could feel, as he grew used to being in his body again, that it could endure no more. Yet all he could think about was finding the five monks to tell them that he was enlightened. Gautama tried to uncross his stick legs and get up, but when he moved them an inch, the wasted muscles screamed with pain. He stared at them with a slight frown of disapproval, like a new father who feels helpless when the baby cries.

Gautama felt no sympathy for his body, but it would have to be dealt with. He willed his limbs to move, and slowly he began to crawl along the forest floor. It felt damp and hot; there were vermin that slid under his skin, and fungi and rocks. He could hear running water nearby. He sensed his body's desperate thirst. Maybe he would get to water in time, maybe not. He kept crawling, but the forest floor barely crept beneath him now. He could practically count each beetle that his weight crushed. A small snake, colored brilliant red, slithered away at the level of his face. The air became very still, and moving any farther, even at a crawl, became impossible.

Lying there, he never expected that enlightenment would be the last thing to happen before he died.

PART THREE

BUDDHA

16

While he lay motionless on the ground, Gautama became dimly aware that a shadow had fallen over him. When it moved, he assumed it must be the outline of a large animal, a predator drawn by his smell. The animal would most likely be hungry, yet it made no difference to Gautama how his time on earth ended.

“Please don’t die.”

The girl’s voice caused his eyes to look up, almost against his will. She was startled and moved back shyly. She must have been all of sixteen, and alone. Gautama closed his eyes and waited for her timidity to send her away. Instead, he felt soft warm hands on either side of his face. The girl raised his head slightly and wiped the grime away from his cheeks with a corner of her sari. It was faded blue and threadbare, a poor girl’s sari.

“Here.”

She pressed something to his mouth. A bowl, and its edge hurt his cracked dry lips. Gautama shook his head, and a croaked word came out of his throat.

“No.”

The girl said, “Are you a god?”

Gautama felt a wave of delirium; her words sounded meaningless. The girl said, “I’ve come to the river to be blessed by the god who lives there. It’s my wedding day in a month.”

A god? Gautama couldn't even smile. He shook his head slightly and let his face fall back to touch the warm jungle floor. But from wasting away he had become weaker than the girl, so he couldn't resist when she turned him over and held him upright in her arms. She did this effortlessly.

"You must." She held the bowl to his mouth again. "Don't be stubborn. If my offering is good enough for a god, you're not better than him, are you?"

Now a smile rose inside Gautama. "Go find your god," he mumbled. He clenched his jaw so that she couldn't pour the contents of the bowl into him. There was no purpose in her being there.

"I won't leave you here," she said. "I can't have people saying that Sujata did something like that."

In the midst of his torpor, Gautama's mind suddenly became alert. What she said didn't seem possible. "Tell me your name again."

"Sujata. What's wrong?"

The girl saw tears streaming down the dying man's cheeks. His emaciated body began to tremble in her arms. She felt terribly sorry for him. Weakly he opened his mouth, and Sujata poured a little food into it. She had cooked sweet rice in milk for the river deity. The dying man accepted more. His stubbornness had vanished, though the girl had no idea why.

In a stricken voice he mumbled, "What have I done?"

"I don't know," said the girl, confused. But she was no longer shy or frightened by him. "We have to get you home. Can you walk at all?"

"In a little while." Gautama ate the rest of the sweet rice with painful slowness. Then Sujata left him for a moment and returned with some water. He drank it greedily, his cracked lips bleeding slightly as he opened his mouth.

"I'll carry you as far as I can, and then I'll get my brother," Sujata said. Gently she lifted Gautama to his feet. His brittle

legs looked like they might snap. He couldn't walk, but he was light enough so that the girl could prop him against her shoulder. Together they hobbled their way up the narrow trail she had taken to the river. They arrived at a road, and Sujata placed him under a tree, propped up against the trunk like a limp doll.

“Wait here. Don't let anyone move you.”

Tears started rolling down his cheeks again. Sujata found it hard to watch; she hurried away and soon disappeared around the bend. Gautama wished she hadn't gone. He suddenly felt alone and desolate. *Sujata*. He hadn't heard that name in fifteen years. But he had not forgotten her. This was the cause of his weeping, because five years of austerity hadn't wiped out his memories. It all came back in a flood: his first sight of Sujata on his eighteenth birthday when his robes were gaudy enough for an elephant. Winding his red turban. The excitement he suppressed when he felt stirrings of desire for her. As soon as he recalled these things, it was as if a dead flower in the desert received the spring rains. His mind unfolded in layers, bringing back image after image from the past, and with them the emotions he had wanted to extinguish. He was badly dehydrated, and soon his tear ducts had nothing more to offer.

Gautama rolled his head back and stared at the jungle. It gave back nothing. It was neither a friendly haven nor a dangerous wilderness. The flowers weren't smiling, the air was not luxuriously moist and enveloping. The blank face of Nature was all he saw, and a surge of horror ran through Gautama. He wanted to vomit, but with all his will he forced the sweet rice and water to stay down. Weak as he was, he could dimly hear his thoughts, and they told him he had to survive. Karma hadn't died, and neither had he.

The light began to fade. Gautama knew it was close to noon, so he must be fainting. His head grew light; a cold sweat beaded his chest. It was a relief to lose consciousness, so he allowed himself to sink into the sensation of falling and falling. Scarlet parrots scolded loudly overhead; he lay so still

that a couple of curious monkeys began to advance down the tree trunk with caution. Gautama wasn't aware of this. His mind was captured by the face of Ganaka, which he saw clearly. It wore an expression he couldn't read. Grief? Contempt? Compassion? Blackness swallowed up whatever it was.

SUJATA'S HUT WAS FLIMSY, its mud walls cracked. There was almost no protection from the weather, which meant that spring could enter as it pleased. Gautama lay in bed, weak and feverish, for some weeks before he noticed this. One morning a white sal blossom floated down from the trees, slid sideways on the breeze, and came in through a large crack in the wall. It landed on Gautama's face and rested there. The fragrance opened his eyes.

“Aren't you pretty?”

Sujata laughed and lifted the flower to her nose. “Thank you, noble sir.” She pinned it behind her ear. The girl took her nursing duties lightly, hiding any worries she might have from her patient.

“Nothing seems pretty to me,” Gautama said. He had taken to speaking his mind.

“I don't believe you,” said Sujata.

They were alone together every day. The hut had been abandoned after her grandmother died, and she had begged her family to let the stranger recover there. Her family didn't want to set eyes on his skin-covered skeleton anyway, so Sujata got what she wanted without objection.

Gautama lifted himself up on his elbows. It was the most effort he had expended since arriving there. “I want to go outside.”

“I won't stop you,” said Sujata with mock indifference.

Gautama gave a wry smile. “Since when did you become so cruel?” He fell back onto his pillow. She was right; he

wasn't strong enough to be helped into the sunlight yet. "Are you still marking the days?"

Sujata glanced at a piece of bark nailed to one wall; it had twenty *X*'s scratched into it. "There, see?"

"You must have left out quite a few. Has it been a month, maybe three months?"

Not wanting him to know that he had been ill for five weeks, Sujata defended herself. "I'd have no fiancé if you stayed three months. It's bad enough already." She began to feed him a mixture of boiled rice and lentils. She wasn't complaining. Her good-hearted husband-to-be didn't mind waiting a while longer; they had been engaged since she was eleven.

"Will you go home when you're well?" she asked.

Gautama turned his face away, avoiding the next bite of food. "I'm sorry," Sujata said. "You've taken vows."

He gave her a serious look. "Would you respect a man who would keep a vow even if he died?"

"You mean you?" She shook her head. "No."

Gautama didn't mind that he was as passive and dependent as a baby. All he basically knew how to do was be still. There wasn't a scrap of enlightenment left. The gods had had their joke. Now he was just another starving wretch who had been found, addled and lost, wandering in the forest.

Because his healing was so slow, time slowed down with it. He'd idle an hour watching a sunbeam move across the floor in the morning. Specks of dust floated hazily in it, and a holy verse came to mind. "Worlds come and go like dust motes in a beam of sunlight shining through a hole in the roof." He used to think those words were beautiful; now they were flat. He got stronger every day, but inside he never lost his horror. Nature's blank face continued to stare back at him wherever he looked. His eyes would move from the sores on his skin to the sun shining through the open window, then to

Sujata's face and the sal blossom in her ear. They were all the same dull nothing.

“Starting tonight, I'm going to feed myself,” Gautama announced. “And tomorrow I'm going outside, even if you have to carry me.” Sujata smiled. “You've gotten too fat. I'll drop you.”

Because he couldn't stop himself from speaking his mind, Gautama said, “Do you know how beautiful you are?”

“Oh!” Sujata had picked up a broom to sweep the packed-mud floor. Her hair was roughly tied back; she was too poor to own any makeup, and she rouged her cheeks with berry stain when she knew her fiancé was coming. “Why do you talk like that? You said you took a vow.” She looked embarrassed and displeased.

“My vow must be very powerful. I can see that you're beautiful, but I don't care.”

Now Sujata looked more displeased. Turning her back, she swept the floor with a vengeance, throwing up clouds of dust. For half an hour they had nothing to say to each other. But then two monkeys fighting in the yard made Sujata laugh, and when she adjusted Gautama's bedclothes, her eyes regarded him mildly, without a hint of resentment.

After that, as promised, he fed himself and was taken on wobbly legs out into the yard. He wasn't a limp doll anymore, so he could be sat in a wicker chair instead of being propped against a tree. Sujata was surprised that he didn't care where he was put, in sun or shade. One day she came out to find that he'd stepped on some foraging red ants, and now a hundred of them, fierce biters, were climbing up his leg. Gautama didn't wince; he didn't even look down at them.

Brushing the attackers off, and with them the blood from their bites, she said, “What are you doing to yourself? I didn't pull you out of the woods so you'd care about nothing. Find something, and do it quick.” She turned away and began to cry.

“I’d obey you if I could,” said Gautama. “I owe you everything.”

His voice sounded humble and sincere, but inside he was as detached from her distress as from everything else. Sujata sensed this, no doubt. Otherwise how to explain the fact that he woke up the next day to find the hut empty? She left pots of food but nothing else. The door was locked, the floor still damp from being washed. Gautama took this all in and waited. He wondered, as an impartial spectator might wonder watching a stranger, if his mind would grieve or feel abandoned. When nothing happened, he went outside to watch the clouds, something he did every day.

Every day that he grew stronger, he felt more removed from that fiercely certain monk who had been willing to die for God. Gautama wasn’t a zealot anymore, but there was nothing to put in its place. He took his eyes off a camel-humped cloud and looked at his hands. They had fleshed out again, and so had his wasted arms and legs. He tried to remember how old he was. Thirty-five seemed right. Young enough to take up honest labor or return to the monk’s life, or even go home and become the good prince again.

It was time to choose one, since he couldn’t remain alone in Sujata’s hut. Choosing seemed impossible, though. He was a blank. At best he was a vaporous, drifting cloud, like the ones he stared at. After a while, Gautama decided to imitate a cloud by going nowhere in particular. He cleaned the hut of any sign that he had ever stayed there, shut the door behind him, and walked away.

When his sandals contacted the familiar packed dirt of the road, his gait settled into a mechanical tread. Soon he passed other travelers, but they didn’t look his way. Maybe he’d lost his presence too, or perhaps it was just his half-starved appearance. Gautama’s eyes saw the sights of the jungle—birds, animals, the light streaming in bright bars through the still leaf canopy—and he had the impression that every sensation was passing through him. *I am water*, he thought. *I am air*.

This wasn't unpleasant. If he was going to spend the rest of his life as a blank, feeling transparent wasn't the worst thing. He walked a bit farther, and he had another thought. *I am not suffering*. When had he stopped suffering? He didn't know, because his body had been in pain for those weeks, which distracted him. Physical pain wasn't the same as suffering, he realized that. Suffering happens to a person, and he was fairly sure he had turned into something new, a nonperson.

He stared at the sunset, its red-gold streaks breaking through tall white clouds. Over the jungle canopy he saw the crest of a tall tree and headed for it. The ground around the tree was soft and springy, free of fungus. He looked up and saw that this was a pipal or fig tree. The sky darkened quickly; soon it was barely possible to see sapphire patches between the black silhouettes of the foliage. Gautama sat down to meditate.

He wondered if a nonperson needed to meditate, and at first the answer seemed to be no. When he closed his eyes he didn't sink into a cool, safe silence. Instead, it was like being in a lightless cave where there was no difference between having his eyes open or shut. But since he had nothing to do and nowhere to go, he decided that meditation was as good as anything else. He caught sight of the waning moon, which was three-quarters full. Vaguely Gautama thought it would be nice to be the moon. And then he was.

It didn't happen immediately. He sat, and the waning moon turned into a sliver, then a hairline of luminescence in the sky, before it waxed again. He caught a glimpse of it only once a night; otherwise he had his eyes closed. Nothing was changing inside him. Only by the moon did Gautama realize when seven weeks had passed.

"I'm here. You can open your eyes now."

Gautama was past having delusions, so the voice must be real. He opened his eyes. A yogi with long locks and a beard had found him and was sitting with crossed legs under the tree.

The moonlight was bright enough to reveal the face of the doomed monk Ganaka.

“You don’t have to disguise yourself,” said Gautama. “I was expecting to see you, Mara.”

“Really?” The form of Ganaka smiled. “I didn’t want to shock you. I am, as you know, basically kind.”

“Kind enough to show me an image of grief? I am past grieving,” Gautama said.

“Then take this image as a greeting from Ganaka instead. I know him well,” said Mara. “He is in my care now.”

“Then he must be in a place of torment. But I am beyond horror too. So tell me quickly why you’ve come, with as few lies as you can.”

“I’m here to teach you. Remember, that was my offer when you were young,” Mara said. “But you misjudged me, as everyone does. Now you must be wiser.”

“You think it’s wiser to have a demon for a teacher?” As they bantered, Gautama felt nothing toward Mara, neither fear nor dislike. Even wondering why the demon had sought him was a faint impulse on the edge of his mind.

“You still misjudge me,” Mara said in a cajoling voice. “I know the secrets of the universe. No knowledge can be kept from me since my role is to see into the crevices of every soul. I will share all that I know with you.”

“No.”

“I didn’t hear that. You’ve craved knowledge ever since I met you. I saw it in your eyes. Why turn your back on me now? I’m greater than these yogis you’ve wasted your time with,” the demon said.

“The one who wanted to know everything no longer exists,” said Gautama. “I have nothing left to ask.”

“Stubbornness doesn’t become you, my friend. I’m disappointed.” Mara’s tone of voice was smooth and assured,

but he was sitting close enough that Gautama felt the demon's body tremble with suppressed rage. Mara said, "I thought you were above other souls. But if you insist on being common, let me satisfy what you really want."

These words were greeted with peals of laughter. Through the trees came three beautiful women carrying oil lamps; incense swirled around them. As Gautama watched, a pool of water appeared in the forest. The women began to disrobe, casting glances at him and giggling softly.

"My three daughters," said Mara. "They never fail to charm, so why pretend? You want them."

The women had silky pale skin and full breasts. Gautama looked on while they bathed themselves, using every suggestive gesture they could find; their hands were delicate, and the way they touched themselves only faintly hinted at lewdness.

"I told them you weren't coarse, but as you can see, they will adapt themselves to your every desire," said Mara.

"Yes, I see that," said Gautama. "The man who once had a wife no longer exists. I can accept your daughters as new wives. Tell them to approach."

Mara smiled with satisfaction. The three women emerged from the bathing pool and draped themselves with gossamer saris that showed their naked bodies in the moonlight. Mara made a gesture, and the first daughter knelt submissively before Gautama.

"What is your name, beautiful one?" Gautama asked.

"I am Tanha."

"Your name means 'desire.' I will take you for a wife, but unfortunately I have no desire for you. If you marry me, you will never feel desire or be desired ever again. Is that acceptable?"

Before his eyes the lovely face of Tanha turned into the face of a long-toothed demon, and with a howl she vanished

from sight.

“Let me see your second daughter,” said Gautama. Mara, looking displeased, waved his hand abruptly, and the second young woman knelt before them.

“What is your name, beautiful one?” asked Gautama.

“Raga.”

“Your name means ‘lust.’ I was born a male, and therefore your appeal is well known to me. I will take you for a wife, but if we marry, you must respect my vows. Your heart of fire will be turned to ice, and you will never lust or be lusted after again. Is that acceptable?”

In an instant Raga was transformed into a ball of fire, which rushed at Gautama to sear his flesh. Instead, the fire passed through him and vanished.

“Show me your last daughter,” Gautama said. “The first two won’t have me.”

Mara jumped to his feet in a rage. “You treat my gentle girls badly. They only want to serve you, and in return you cruelly abuse them.”

“But your third daughter is so beautiful, I can’t possibly mistreat her. Bring her to me. I’m sure we will be married,” Gautama said gently. Mara regarded him with dark suspicion but made a small gesture. The third daughter knelt before them.

“Don’t ask me my name,” she said. “I am free of all desire and lust. I am as indifferent to you as you are to me. We are perfectly matched.”

“You’re very subtle,” said Gautama. “But I already know your name. It’s Arati, or ‘aversion.’ You want nothing because you hate everything. I will make you my wife, but only on the condition that you open yourself to love. Is that acceptable?”

Arati’s face assumed a look of unspeakable disgust. In alarm Mara reached his arms out to hold on to her, but he was too late. In an instant she vanished like the others. The demon

gave a howl that grew louder and fiercer until it filled the whole forest. He swelled in size, and the form of Ganaka dropped away. Mara began to grow his four horrible faces.

“I’m going to see you as you really are. Good,” said Gautama.

“Arrogance!” Mara screamed. “You shall see me, all right, and the moment you do, you will die.”

He began to make mysterious signs in the air that Gautama didn’t understand, and like magic, the kingdom of the demons descended to earth. The forest floor crawled with poisonous snakelike demons, slithering over Gautama’s lap, while batlike demons tried to bite his face. A phalanx of elephants crashed through the trees, trampling other demons of damned souls whose bodies were crushed underfoot. Because the demon world consists of the most disgusting and terrifying forms that the human mind can conceive of, there was no end to the waves of Mara’s subjects that emerged in the moonlight.

Mara himself rode a massive bull elephant that held writhing souls between its jaws. At first he remained aloof, waiting for his army to annihilate Gautama by sucking it into a maelstrom of torment. But when he saw the calmness of Gautama’s gaze, Mara became agitated.

“Resist me all you like. I will never depart from you, and neither will my subjects. This spectacle is what you will see for the rest of your life.”

“I am not resisting. You are all welcome to stay,” said Gautama. “You cannot attack what isn’t here, and I am not here.”

“Not here?” said Mara. “You’re insane.”

“Or perhaps I just lack a soul. Doesn’t it take a soul to be damned?”

The calmness of Gautama’s speech not only infuriated the demon king but caused his subjects to begin to fade away like shadow puppets on a screen or summer lightning inside a cloud.

“Prove it to yourself,” said Gautama. “If you can find my soul, it’s yours. I have stopped caring, myself.”

Mara leaped from the elephant and crouched on the ground in front of Gautama. “Done!” he hissed. He had never experienced any creature, mortal or divine, without a soul, and now this fool had freely surrendered his. “You’re mine, and I will claim you when it pleases me.” Every other spectre had disappeared by now. Mara’s four malignant faces lingered for a few more seconds before he too vanished.

Gautama doubted he would ever see him again. The existence of his soul, like everything else, held no interest. Total detachment is the one great healer of karma. Yet the whisper of desire softly said, “Do not kill me. Have pity. Let me know even your slightest wish.”

He looked up and remembered the moon, which was perfectly full as it floated above the jungle canopy.

“Let me become the moon,” Gautama replied. “I have nothing to wish for down here.”

He had only wanted to have sway over his own destiny. It was the simplest of human wishes, yet it had been a source of fear and uncertainty his whole life. Everyone had told him, directly or indirectly, that it was impossible. Gautama felt a slight resistance even now, as if the gods would destroy him on the spot for usurping their power. Instead, he felt the last veil fall away from his mind, a sensation a hundred times more delicate than dropping a layer of gossamer. Then he became the moon and experienced what the moon experienced. It was impossible to put into words: a cool serenity that thrilled at its own existence. A concern for nothing but light itself. Gautama was aware of all these ingredients, yet the thing itself was ineffable.

The moon seemed to know that he had arrived, and he felt it bow down. *I have waited.* His gaze searched the sky, and these words seemed to come from everywhere, not just the moon but also the stars and the blackness between the stars. His heart began to swell.

I have waited too.

The sky bent down to envelop him. Now he understood why he had to become a nonperson. He had to be naked. Only in innocence does the mask fall away. *So this is it, he thought. The truth.* Gautama gave his heart permission to swell beyond the sky. He didn't know what lay beyond, or how far he could go. He had found his freedom, and in freedom everything is permitted.

17

The sun rose, and Gautama found himself sitting on the soft, springy ground under the pipal tree. He got to his feet and tried walking. It was a strange experience—as he passed through the forest, the forest seemed to pass through him. Its breath mingled with his; its trees and vines extended from his body. He could feel the wind blowing through the swaying canopy overhead.

Gautama knew that everything had changed permanently. From now on, living in the physical world would be like dreaming. He could make things appear and disappear as easily as a dreamer does. A castle made of gold or a circle of angels around his head, stars exploding into bursts of white light or a deer nestling in his lap to sleep—they all appeared instantly at the hint of a thought.

Now he could sit under the pipal tree, silent and unmoving, and never return to the world. His journey was complete. But he still had a choice. To leave or stay?

Everyone from his past had given up on him long ago. And if he suddenly reappeared, how would he explain what he had become? The priests would certainly call him a fraud. Great souls are safe only as long as they stay put in the scriptures.

Gautama's choice weighed heavily on him. Several mornings he felt that someone was thinking about him. Yashodhara. When her name came to him, Gautama saw her clearly. His wife was sitting alone in her room, mending a hem by the light of an open window. Gautama had seen her face many times during his wandering, but this was different. He

was in the room with her, feeling her yearning, which was always for him. One person hadn't given up.

Gautama thought of other people and found them as well. Channa was saddling a roan warhorse in the stables, and Gautama sensed that he was now master there; old Bikram had died. Suddhodana was asleep, alone with the drapes drawn. He was trying to escape a bad dream about an old battle.

Gautama could be anywhere and everywhere he wanted. Just by thinking of people, he could touch their minds. Not everyone would listen. Not everyone would feel his touch, but for a moment their troubles would ease. Is that what a Buddha did? Without warning, he started weeping. He was no longer husband, lover, or friend. He was a new Buddha, untried, wobbly, three days out of the womb. But he had no doubt that Gautama no longer existed.

The new Buddha arose, adjusted his saffron robe, and began walking toward the road, the same as on a thousand other days. Once he reached the road, he found it completely empty, even though the time was early morning, when farmers' carts should have been trundling to market. The emptiness seemed even odder after hours had passed and still he hadn't met a single wagon or foot traveler.

Buddha could be completely alone in the world. Why not? It was his world to do with as he pleased. He was the one dreaming it. Some skittish parrots overhead burst into flight as Buddha laughed out loud. This was outrageous! If a king ruled the world, he would run wild. He would tear it to shreds in anger, toy with it, wrap his body in its sensual delights.

Instead, he possessed the world as Buddha, so none of those possibilities came true. His powers flowed from the other side of silence, where the mind can make anything happen. For a little while the new Buddha enjoyed himself, pulling the sun through the sky like a toy cart, swirling the winds around the poles, shedding rain on a parched desert. This private diversion didn't last long. Buddha's world should have people in it whom he could care for. He recalled what

Canki had said about a Golden Age—an age without suffering, where abundance was normal and scarcity forgotten in the dim past.

At that moment his vision was shattered by a scream. He saw a woman running toward him, her sari torn to shreds, her arms bleeding. In her panic the woman was blind to Buddha's existence until she was nearly upon him. Then her eyes registered him standing there, still and calm.

With a cry she rushed to throw herself into his arms, overwhelmed with relief. When she was two steps away, he held his hand up in blessing. The woman stopped in her tracks. She quivered with terror, her breast heaving.

“No more fear,” Buddha whispered. “Give it to me.”

She dropped to the road as if her body had melted and began to weep.

“All,” said Buddha. “Give it all to me.”

The woman became very still; the crying had stopped. Buddha erased the images of terror from her mind. He saw a knife. Teeth like fangs. A necklace made of severed fingers. The images were nightmarish. With the slightest touch, he made them vanish. But one image wouldn't melt away—the body of her dead husband. He lay in the dust of the road, his throat slashed.

The woman was touching Buddha's feet now in supplication. Something inside her knew who he was. She gazed at him through her eyes and said, “Please.”

Buddha stopped himself from consoling her. He lifted the woman's head and met her gaze. “It is done,” he said. She shuddered and fainted. After a moment, as Buddha stood motionless, a man rounded the corner driving an ox cart. Her husband. Buddha gestured for him to approach, and he sped up. Seeing his wife on the ground, the husband jumped down in alarm.

“What happened?” he cried.

“It will be all right. Let’s put her in the cart.” The two of them gently laid her in the straw behind the driver’s seat. The husband had some fresh water in a goatskin bag; he wanted to splash it on her to reassure himself that she was all right. Buddha stopped his hand. “Let her wake up on her own. She may be surprised to see you, but calm her with loving words. You understand?”

The farmer nodded. By imagining the farmer alive and well again, he had erased the whole attack. It wasn’t difficult. He hadn’t raised the husband from the dead. All he did was say no softly to himself. The event he refused to accept no longer existed. Buddha smiled at the husband, and when he had nothing more to say, the farmer thanked him and left.

Power over time and fate. Buddha mused on this as he walked. Does a Buddha reverse every harm? Even if he had that power, did he have the right to change karma on a whim?

In a short while he saw the first huts of a small village. As he approached, people came out wearing suspicious and fearful looks. Some carried pitchforks and rusty swords. They glared as Buddha passed, and in each mind he heard the same word: *Angulimala*. He soon realized that this was the name of someone they all feared. A killer. A madman. A monster.

Buddha continued to the local temple, whose tiled roof was the highest point in the village. In the shadowy cool of the inner sanctum he saw an old priest cleaning the altar of faded flowers and burnt incense ashes. He approached.

“Namaste.”

The priest barely acknowledged him. Remote as this temple was, he maintained the air of a Brahmin. Instead of praying beside him, Buddha sat cross-legged before the altar and waited. The old priest threw a few fresh flowers onto the Shiva statue and turned to leave.

“Angulimala,” Buddha said.

The priest got angry. “Don’t say such a thing. This is a holy place.”

Buddha said, “I think you forbid the name of Angulimala because you fear he might hear and invade your kingdom.” The old priest squinted his eyes, wondering if he was being mocked. “I can help,” Buddha added.

This offer was greeted with a harsh laugh. “How? Are you a warrior monk? It wouldn’t matter. Angulimala has killed his share of warriors. He has powers. He exchanged his soul for them.”

“What powers?”

“He can outrun a horse. He can hide without being seen and spring down on travelers from the tops of trees. Enough?”

“Perhaps, if any are true. I doubt that these powers have been observed if he kills everyone he meets and the few survivors are terrified,” said Buddha.

The priest, who was bald and slightly hunched, relented slightly. “You’re right about that, stranger. Come with me. I can feed you, and with a little food in your stomach you might stop deluding yourself that you can help.” The old priest managed a tight smile; something deep inside had been touched by the stranger’s offer. They retired to the temple kitchen, and when the stranger’s bowl was filled with rice and lentils, the two sat outside in the shade to eat.

“As you know, *anguli* means fingers,” said the priest. “To terrify everyone the more, this killer collects the fingers of his victims and wears them as a necklace around his throat. Very few know his real story, but I am one. The monster began life as the mild son of a Brahmin family with no money. At fourteen he was sent to school in a nearby village, with the hope that once he was educated he could perform rites at the temple and restore his family’s fortunes.

“But the Brahmin who ran the school was of unbalanced mind. He accused the boy of sleeping with his wife and threw him out in disgrace.” Buddha didn’t detect much pity for suffering in the old priest’s heart, but he genuinely felt sorry for the wronged boy.

“The scandal reached home before the boy did. When he crossed the threshold, his father beat him brutally and threw him out to fend for himself. The family’s hopes for restoring their fortunes were dashed. It didn’t matter that their son was innocent.”

As the priest recounted the tale, Buddha could see every event in his mind. What lay ahead looked much darker. “There was nothing for him to live for but death,” Buddha murmured.

“He was born cursed, and there’s no hope for him,” the old priest said severely.

“Did anyone try to give him hope?” asked Buddha. The priest scowled, but their meal was over. In gratitude, Buddha bowed his head. He didn’t prostrate himself at the Brahmin’s feet. This caused the old priest to keep a moody silence as he escorted his visitor to the gate.

“You’re a fool to go after him. I can see that’s what you have in mind,” the Brahmin said. “But if you must, here’s a charm to protect you.” He held out some dried herbs bundled with a prayer scribbled on a leaf. Buddha accepted it.

“Tell me one thing,” said Buddha. “Why does Angulimala kill so many people?”

“To save himself,” the old priest replied. “The disgraced boy took to the woods. He began to live like an animal. He ate roots and insects and covered his body with hides. They say by chance he met a wandering fortune-teller, who told him the curse could be lifted only by collecting a thousand fingers and offering them as sacrifice to Shiva. That’s why he wears his terrible necklace.”

“Then I must help him,” said Buddha. “Otherwise Angulimala will show up here one day to sacrifice his necklace on your altar.”

The old priest shuddered visibly and then slammed the gate shut behind him.

THOUGHTS OF ANGULIMALA stayed in Buddha's mind that day and the next morning. Why was he drawn to the monster?

He walked deeper into the jungle to face the question. It was a blazing afternoon when Buddha found himself on a hidden trail through the jungle. There was a rustle, then before he could turn his head, a wild beast jumped down from the trees and crouched before him. The covering of matted hides made Angulimala look like a giant ferocious ape baring its fangs.

Buddha regarded the wild man's teeth, which had been crudely filed to a point, and his necklace of withered fingers. In his left hand he carried a long curved blade. "Namaste," said Buddha. Angulimala growled.

"I cannot save you unless you tell me how you are suffering," said Buddha. "An animal doesn't need saving."

The wild man showed no reaction. He could reach his prey in one leap, so he raised his knife and with a howl sprang toward Buddha. When he came to earth, however, his knife slashed at empty air. Buddha was standing, as before, two paces away. Angulimala looked bewildered.

"You do not have to ask for mercy or forgiveness," said Buddha. "Speak your real name, not the monster's that you have assumed."

The wild man took another leap at Buddha, and as before, when he landed his blade swished through the air. Buddha was standing two paces away.

"I can only stop a moment," Buddha said. "But if you want my help, come to me."

He turned his back on Angulimala and began slowly walking away. Behind him there was a scream of rage. One thing the old Brahmin had said was true: Angulimala possessed enough demonic energy that he could outrun a horse. He charged at Buddha, his knife stretched out in front like a spear. It should have taken only a few seconds to reach his prey, but Buddha remained a step ahead. Angulimala sped

up, panting as he ran. His bare feet stirred up a cloud of dust, but he couldn't close the gap between himself and Buddha. This kept up for ten minutes, until the wild man fell to the ground, clutching at his cramped legs. Buddha turned around and regarded him.

"There's a small distance between you and me," he said mildly. "Shall I close it? I can."

He reached down and touched the killer's matted hair, and Angulimala began to weep. "Please tell me your real name," Buddha urged. There was a pause, and Angulimala shivered from head to toe. "Why?" he moaned. By this he meant, *Why should anyone help me? I am damned.*

"I will tell you, but I can't explain to an animal," said Buddha.

Angulimala clutched at himself, writhing on the ground. Buddha stood quietly, letting the demonic energy drain away. It would take more than a single seizure to purify the wild man, but this was a beginning. After he had thrashed in the dust for some minutes, a name came out. "Anigha," he said.

"Look at me, Anigha," Buddha said. "We are brothers."

The wild man was pacified from exhaustion, his body spent. He raised his head as Buddha bent over to bless him. "You were once a great saint," said Buddha. "Now you have become a great sinner. This was not a curse. The cycle of birth and rebirth has brought you full circle. The same thing happens to everyone. It has happened to me."

Each word he spoke caused a change in Anigha. His eyes looked far away; he seemed to remember something deep and profound. Tears rolled down his cheeks. "I am damned," he said aloud, his voice becoming more human.

"No, you share the same fate as everyone," said Buddha. "You wanted to find a way out of suffering. The only difference is that you asked for the life of a monster. You imagined that if you caused enormous suffering, you would be immune to it."

The weight of Anigha's crimes was crushing him—he groaned.

“It's horrible to bring hell on earth,” said Buddha. “There was another purpose, though, that no one sees.” Anigha stared in bafflement. “You hungered for the supreme truth many lifetimes ago. The gods failed you; your vows as a monk led to nothing but deeper disappointment. So you swore that you would not be redeemed unless the greatest sinner received the same treatment.”

Now Anigha grasped Buddha's feet and was sobbing loudly as his pain poured out. Buddha took his hands away and lifted him up. “If you are part of me, you need nothing else to be saved,” he said.

Anigha said, “But I have killed.”

“You fell into evil so that you could prove to yourself that there is a reality that evil cannot touch. Will you let me show it to you?”

Anigha listened quietly, then he looked down at his filthy body clothed in bloodied hides. They were unrecognizable now as part of him. He led Buddha to a stream and washed the dirt away. When he had washed off as much as he could, he came out of the water. “I will follow you anywhere,” he said. “Angulimala is dead.”

“You will always be with me. But for the moment you need to stay here,” said Buddha. “Devote yourself to atonement. Leave food for the poor. Offer flowers and water at the temple gate for those who want to make sacrifice. Help lost travelers whom you once terrified. Whatever you do, don't show yourself. I will return for you very soon.”

Anigha didn't find it easy to let Buddha go; he still half-believed that he was in a dream devised by a mischievous demon. After a while, though, his exhaustion made him nod off as the two sat under a tree talking. Buddha arose and left quietly. He gave no thought to where he was going next. But

something had happened that he alone knew. He had altered the course of evil with a touch and a word.

He was still a new Buddha, four days out of the womb, but every moment was bringing him greater power and more wisdom to use it well.

18

The five monks had retreated to a forest glade near Benares after they parted from Gautama. Months passed. Now the glade was beautiful with overhanging trees in the riotous bloom of spring. They knew Gautama must be dead, although the subject was never raised. The five monks lived a secluded life, but their time of extreme austerity was over and done with.

Returning to a moderate life seemed sensible, but a faint gloom settled over their existence because every forest monk wanted to reach enlightenment. Gautama's failure spelled failure for them too. Therefore, when he walked into their camp one morning, the five monks were relieved for themselves as much as for him.

After they greeted him with exclamations and expressed their joy, the monks sat and waited for their brother to describe what had happened. It was as if someone had returned from the dead. They expected a miracle story. At the very least, he would describe the wonders of enlightenment. But Buddha only wanted to be with them quietly, his glance occasionally moving from one to the other.

"We mourned for you, Gautama," Kondana, the youngest, said.

"Because you knew that Gautama was no more," said Buddha. "And you were right."

This was something they understood since it's a matter of course that someone who reaches enlightenment has severed all connections to his former personality. But none of the five monks had actually met anyone who had gotten there.

“If you aren’t Gautama, who are you?” Assaji asked.

“I keep Gautama’s body, and you can call me by his name if you like,” said Buddha, smiling. “You need some way to find me in the dark. But I am not this body or this name. I am not a person any longer as you know it.”

“That tells me what you are not, but I still don’t know what you are,” said Assaji, pressing the point.

Instead of replying, Buddha closed his eyes and went into samadhi, something they had seen Gautama do a thousand times. Assaji was about to signal that they should follow suit when Gautama unexpectedly opened his eyes again. The monks were used to him being lost in silence for days.

“Do you want to meditate alone?” Assaji asked. “We can leave you.”

“It’s not that, dear friend,” said Buddha. “I have talked with only a few people since I came to be awakened. One blessed me with knowledge of good and evil. But no one has asked me who I am until now. You have given me another blessing.”

Assaji looked confused. “How is that?” he asked.

“When I closed my eyes, I saw my past lifetimes. Ten thousand of them, and I lived each one moment by moment.”

The five monks were amazed. “In the blink of an eye?” Kondana exclaimed.

Buddha smiled. “Two blinks, if you like. We have all been told since childhood that the cycle of birth and rebirth has brought us back many times. But as I went back to those lifetimes, I found that all of them were equal. I am every life I’ve ever lived, and yet I am none of them, for I can be here or there whenever I want.”

“Is this the knowledge that set you free?” said Assaji.

“Do you ask me that because you really want to know or because you feel worried and insecure?” asked Buddha.

Assaji looked uncomfortable. “Your feat seems superhuman,” he said. “If it takes something like that to reach enlightenment, what hope do we have? We’re just ordinary monks.” The others murmured in agreement.

“I didn’t return to discourage you or to awe you. You asked me who I am, and now I can tell you. I can also tell you who you are. You are not the separate self. You have a name that you answer to, but you have also answered to ten thousand other names. Which one is the real you? None of them. You identify with a set of memories. You know who your father and mother are. You set your sights on a goal that you cherish.

“But you have done exactly the same thing ten thousand times before. Therefore your memories, your parents, and your cherished goals are transient. They change as swiftly as mayflies, which are born and die in a single day.”

The five monks were riveted by Buddha’s talk, but more than that, his words drew them deep inside themselves. It was almost like going into samadhi with one’s eyes open. They saw exactly what he had described. But Assaji was still worried.

“I would be wasting my life to try and unravel ten thousand past lives,” he said. “And if you want me to renounce this lifetime as a phantom, haven’t I already renounced it by becoming a monk?”

“You renounced only the outer trappings,” said Buddha. “A saffron robe doesn’t make you free of desire, and desire is what has kept you a prisoner.”

“You already told us that on the mountain,” Kondana said. “But in six years we never rid ourselves of desire. Our karma still follows us and makes us obey its commands.”

“Which is why I have come for you instead of going first to my family,” said Buddha. “What I urged you to do on the mountain was a mistake. I want to make amends.”

“You owe us nothing,” Assaji said quickly.

“I’m not speaking of a debt,” said Buddha. “Debts end when karma ends. My mistake led you into a trap. I believed that I was in a war with desire. I despised the world and my own body, which craved all the delights of the world.”

“Surely that’s not a mistake,” said Assaji. “Otherwise it would be pointless to take vows. The holy life must be different from the worldly life.”

“What if there is no holy life?” asked Buddha. The five monks became extremely uncomfortable, and none answered. “You see,” said Buddha, “even holiness has become food for your ego to feed on. You want to be different. You want to be safe. You want to have hope.”

“Why is that wrong?” asked Assaji.

“Because these things are dreams that lull you,” said Buddha.

“What would we see if we weren’t dreaming?”

“Death.”

The five monks felt a chill pass over them. It seemed pointless to deny what their brother said but hopeless to accept it. Buddha said, “You are all afraid of death, as I was, so you make up any story that will ease your fears, and after a while you believe the story, even though it came from your own mind.” Without waiting for a reply, he reached down and picked up a handful of dust. “The answer to life and death is simple. It rests in the palm of my hand. Watch.”

He threw the dust into the air; it remained suspended like a murky cloud for a second before the breeze carried it away.

“Consider what you just saw,” said Buddha. “The dust holds its shape for a fleeting moment when I throw it into the air, as the body holds its shape for this brief lifetime. When the wind makes it disappear, where does the dust go? It returns to its source, the earth. In the future that same dust allows grass to grow, and it enters a deer who eats the grass. The animal dies and turns to dust. Now imagine that the dust comes to you and asks, ‘Who am I?’ What will you tell it? Dust is alive in a

plant but dead as it lies in the road under our feet. It moves in an animal but is still when buried in the depths of the earth. Dust encompasses life and death at the same time. So if you answer ‘Who am I?’ with anything but a complete answer, you have made a mistake.

“I have come back to tell you that you can be whole, but only if you see yourself that way. There is no holy life. There is no war between good and evil. There is no sin and no redemption. None of these things matter to the real you. But they all matter hugely to the false you, the one who believes in the separate self. You have tried to take your separate self, with all its loneliness and anxiety and pride, to the door of enlightenment. But it will never go through, because it is a ghost.”

As he spoke, Buddha knew that this sermon would be the first of hundreds. It surprised him that words were so necessary. He had hoped to heal the world with a touch or simply by existing in it. The universe had other plans.

“How can I see myself as whole,” asked Kondana, “when everything I call ‘me’ is separate? I have only one body and one mind, those I was born with.”

“Look at the forest,” Buddha replied. “We walk through it every day and believe it to be the same forest. But not a single leaf is the same as yesterday. Every particle of soil, every plant and animal, is constantly changing. You cannot be enlightened as the separate person you see yourself to be because that person has already disappeared, along with everything else from yesterday.”

The five monks were astonished to hear these words. They revered Gautama, but now his beliefs called for a revolution. If what he said was true, then nothing that they had been taught could be true at the same time. No holy life? No war between good and evil? None of them spoke for a long while. What was there to say to a man who claimed that they didn’t even exist?

“I’ve brought agitation with me,” said Buddha. “I didn’t mean to.” He said this sincerely, after due consideration. He hadn’t realized that being awake would create such a disturbance to other people.

In the blink of an eye, as quickly as he had seen ten thousand previous lifetimes, he saw the human predicament. Everyone was asleep, totally unconscious about their true nature. Some slept fitfully, catching scattered glimpses of the truth. But they quickly fell asleep again. They were the fortunate ones. The bulk of human beings had no glimpse of reality. How could he tell them what he really wanted to say? *All of you are Buddha.*

“I realize that if I stay here I will only agitate you more,” he said. “So help me. Together we must devise a Dharma that will not frighten people. Beginning with you, my frightened brothers.” The five monks smiled at this, and they began to relax a little. Buddha pointed to the trees in bloom all around them. “The Dharma should be this beautiful, and just as effortless,” he said. “If Nature is awake everywhere we look, then human beings deserve the same. Waking up shouldn’t be a struggle.”

“You struggled,” said Assaji.

“Yes, and the more I did, the harder it was to wake up. I made my body and mind into an enemy. On that road lies only death and more death. As long as your body is your enemy, you are tied to it, and the body has no choice but to die. Death will never be defeated until it becomes unreal.”

Years later Assaji would remember that a rainstorm began to pass through the forest as Buddha spoke. Lightning punctuated his words and lit up his face, which wasn’t the fiercely zealous face of Gautama but something unearthly and serene. They heard the patter of raindrops on the forest canopy, which increased to a steady drumming, yet no rain fell on the five monks, not even a stray drop sizzling in the campfire. In this way Nature was telling them that Buddha was

more than a man who had become enlightened. They followed him devotedly after that night.

FOR THE FIRST TIME in six years Buddha's feet touched the road to Kapilavastu. He traveled with the five monks, who gradually lost their anxiety but not their awe. They ate and slept beside their master. They bathed with him in the river, but he no longer meditated or said prayers. One at a time he took each of his brothers aside and gave them private instructions. They were overjoyed to be told that they were very close to enlightenment and would achieve it very soon.

There was one monk who never spoke up. His name was Vappa, and he seemed the most insecure about Gautama coming back to life. When he was taken aside and told that he would be enlightened, Vappa greeted the news with doubt. "If what you tell me is true, I would feel something, and I don't," he said.

"When you dig a well, there is no sign of water until you reach it, only rocks and dirt to move out of the way. You have removed enough; soon the pure water will flow," said Buddha. But instead of being reassured, Vappa threw himself on the ground, weeping and grasping Buddha's feet.

"It will never happen," he moaned. "Don't fill me with false hope."

"I'm not offering hope," said Buddha. "Your karma brought you to me, along with the other four. I can see that you will soon be awake."

"Then why do I have so many impure thoughts?" asked Vappa, who was prickly and prone to outbursts of rage, so much so that the other monks were intimidated by him.

"Don't trust your thoughts," said Buddha. "You can't think yourself awake."

"I have stolen food when I was famished, and there were times when I stole away from my brothers and went to

women,” said Vappa.

“Don’t trust your actions. They belong to the body,” said Buddha. “Your body can’t wake you up.”

Vappa remained miserable, his expression hardening the more Buddha spoke. “I should go away from here. You say there is no war between good and evil, but I feel it inside. I feel how good you are, and it only makes me feel worse.”

Vappa’s anguish was so genuine that Buddha felt a twinge of temptation. He could reach out and take Vappa’s guilt from his shoulders with a touch of the hand. But making Vappa happy wasn’t the same as setting him free, and Buddha knew he couldn’t touch every person on earth. He said, “I can see that you are at war inside, Vappa. You must believe me when I say that you’ll never win.”

Vappa hung his head lower. “I know that. So I must go?”

“No, you misunderstand me,” Buddha said gently. “No one has ever won the war. Good opposes evil the way the summer sun opposes winter cold, the way light opposes darkness. They are built into the eternal scheme of Nature.”

“But you won. You are good; I feel it,” said Vappa.

“What you feel is the being I have inside, just as you have it,” said Buddha. “I did not conquer evil or embrace good. I detached myself from both.”

“How?”

“It wasn’t difficult. Once I admitted to myself that I would never become completely good or free from sin, something changed inside. I was no longer distracted by the war; my attention could go somewhere else. It went beyond my body, and I saw who I really am. I am not a warrior. I am not a prisoner of desire. Those things come and go. I asked myself: Who is watching the war? Who do I return to when pain is over, or when pleasure is over? Who is content simply to be? You too have felt the peace of simply being. Wake up to that, and you will join me in being free.”

This lesson had an immense effect on Vappa, who made it his mission for the rest of his life to seek out the most miserable and hopeless people in society. He was convinced that Buddha had revealed a truth that every person could recognize: suffering is a fixed part of life. Fleeing from pain and running toward pleasure would never change that fact. Yet most people spent their whole lives avoiding pain and pursuing pleasure. To them, this was only natural, but in reality they were becoming deeply involved in a war they could never win.

As the gates of Kapilavastu drew close, Buddha prepared the way. He sent his presence ahead, and he could feel a growing excitement in Yashodhara. She ordered her servants to throw away the somber saris of a widow; she brought out old portraits of Siddhartha to show their son, Rahula, who might be frightened to see the return of a father he knew only in the cradle. Every day Yashodhara performed the same ritual. She would gather Rahula by her side and sit in the gazebo by the lotus pond, the place where Suddhodana's pleasure pavilion used to stand. The old structure had been torn down and the courtesans given honest places as serving women. Siddhartha had never visited them. It was one way he could show his fidelity to Yashodhara. Now she waited there to show her fidelity to him.

Buddha knew that feeling his presence was not enough, though. His wife was still young; for that matter, Siddhartha would be only thirty-five. There was time for more children. Buddha's presence couldn't reach this part of Yashodhara's nature. How could he change her mind without crushing her? The bliss of wedded life was what she lived for.

His mind was preoccupied when the five monks began to stir with agitation. Buddha looked up the road where they were pointing. A horse lathered with sweat and streaming with blood was running toward them in a panicked gallop. The five monks scattered to get out of the way. It was a powerful black stallion. None of them dared to pull Buddha from harm's way; he stood his ground, and as the animal got near, it reared,

slashing out with its iron-shod front feet. For a second the huge animal balanced in midair, thrashing. Then its hooves came to earth without hitting their target. The stallion trembled with pain and terror, but it didn't rear again and slowly began to calm down.

"What happened?" asked Assaji, pressing the cloth of his robe to the horse's worst wound. "Where did this come from?"

"Only one thing is possible," said Buddha. "War. We'll be in the thick of it soon enough."

They hadn't gone another mile before his prediction came true; the din of battle could be faintly heard in the distance. "I am the cause of this," said Buddha. The five monks protested, but Buddha said no more. The group had their hands full keeping the wounded stallion from bolting when he caught the scent of death. More than once Buddha had to pause and look the animal directly in the eye. "The only way to convince him that he doesn't need to be afraid is to show him that I am not. Animals are wiser than us in that regard. If they don't feel peace, they aren't fooled by peaceful words."

The monks knew that Buddha did not make casual remarks. His every utterance was dedicated to teaching them the truth. Very soon the noise of battle grew loud enough that they could hear steel striking against steel and the anguished cries of dying soldiers. Buddha stopped and listened. "Words of peace fooled my father. Devadatta has tricked him into war." Then he pointed away from the conflict. "Home first." An hour later they saw the towers of the gates to the capital city. The road widened, and the last hundred yards were paved with cobblestones.

"Who's there?" a sentry cried.

"One you called Siddhartha," said Buddha.

"I can't let anyone in who isn't a citizen, and I don't know that name," said the sentry, peering through a slot above them. He was young, almost a boy. The real soldiers were all away to do the king's killing.

“Send for Princess Yashodhara’s maid. She will recognize me,” said Buddha. The sentry’s face vanished from the top of the gate. They waited, then the great wooden gates opened just wide enough to admit them and the stallion. Buddha saw where his wife was. Having heard the name Siddhartha, she sent her maid scurrying to the gates while she hurriedly examined herself in the mirror and wrapped herself in a sari threaded with gold.

She was panting and sweating slightly when she seated herself in the gazebo. Rahula was taking a nap, and Yashodhara almost woke him up, but she didn’t want him to see her weep uncontrollably, so she came alone. The wind was light, but whenever it turned slightly she could faintly catch the sounds of war, which increased her anxiety.

“My dear.”

She had been so distracted that he was there before she heard him. With a cry, Yashodhara jumped to her feet, ran to Buddha, and threw her arms around him. She was sensitive to his slightest response, and her heart swelled when she felt his arms hold her without hesitation. This came as such an enormous relief that she began to sob. A husband would have said, “There’s no cause for that. I’m home now. It’s all right.” Yashodhara’s husband said none of those things.

Buddha let go of her, and for an instant Yashodhara felt completely abandoned. She wanted to clutch at him, but he raised a finger in a small gesture, and her arms fell to her sides. “You are my beloved wife. It’s your right to embrace me,” said Buddha. “No one shall ever do that again. Not even you.”

Yashodhara trembled. She had spent years blocking out of her mind any image of Siddhartha as a monk. Even at that moment she kept her eyes fixed on his face, refusing to see his saffron robes. His features began swimming before her, but she wasn’t fainting—no black curtain descending over her eyes, no cold sweat and chill moving up toward her head. Instead, Yashodhara felt warm, and the warmth began in her

heart. It radiated outward. What was happening to her? The world disappeared from sight, not in blackness but in the glow of a white light that had no source. She caught one last glimpse of the sun, but it was pale compared to the light that now filled up her whole being. Now she was certain that the light came from this man who used to be her husband.

“This is your time, Yashodhara. Surrender and be free.”

19

Buddha didn't spend the night in Kapilavastu but took the five monks and headed for the battlefield. It was near sunset when they arrived at a hilltop overlooking the fighting. In the waning light neither side was leading a charge. Elephants and horses had been pulled back from the front. All that remained of the din of war was the clash of swords. Foot soldiers fought in bands with the enemy, raising dust around them.

Buddha sat down on the ridge. From above, every soldier was like a frantic puppet flailing away. Some puppets ran around, bumping into other puppets. They bounced off each other, then one would fall and not get up again. Many puppets littered the field, some writhing a little, others very still.

"Are we going down there?" Kondana asked nervously. "What place is it for monks?"

"We have no other choice," said Buddha. "War is no different from what happens every day. It's another way that men have found to suffer."

"But life isn't always a war," Kondana pointed out.

"Not openly," said Buddha. "But if men weren't so afraid of dying, they would fight every day, and in their hearts their dearest wish would be to see every enemy destroyed." By now the light had faded, ending the skirmishes on the field. The last thing one could see were the scavengers who crept onto the scene to loot dead bodies. The wind carried sweet birdcalls up the hill, mixed with moans of wounded soldiers.

"Master, what you're saying is very dark. It makes the situation hopeless," said Kondana.

“Hope never ended a war.”

That was Buddha’s last word for the night. He folded his robes around him and lay on the ground. The five monks had learned that he had no concern for where he slept or who was nearby. But they had gotten into the habit of seeing after his comforts to the small extent he would allow. They fetched a gourd of water to place by his side and some food brought from the capital. They built a fire and together lay down apart from him out of respect.

Buddha usually urged them to sleep nearby, but they might have been worried to see that he needed no sleep anymore. He rested his body, but his mind remained awake all the time. Now he sent a blessing to Yashodhara and visited his six-year-old son, Rahula, who could hardly stay in bed with the excitement of once more having a father. The boy had been raised to believe secretly that Siddhartha was still alive, so he wasn’t as wonder-struck as the courtiers who set eyes on Buddha. Buddha repeatedly told them that he hadn’t come home to assume the throne, but many kept hoping he would do so.

When the sun rose and all the monks were awake, Buddha pointed to the scene down below, where clusters of soldiers stirred around their campfires. Some ate hurriedly, but most were tending to their horses, sharpening their swords, and repairing ripped leather armor.

“How many will die?” asked Assaji soberly.

“All of them, if not today then one day,” said Buddha curtly. The monks had never heard a heartless remark from their master, and this astonished them. His voice softened. “I told you that the first fact of the world is suffering. We can end suffering, but not by speaking of God.” Buddha’s arm swept across the entire battlefield. “Which of these fighters doesn’t believe that God is on his side?”

“But God relieves suffering too,” said Assaji.

“Never promise such a thing,” said Buddha, shaking his head. “All this religious talk has nothing to do with us. I will tell you how to consider any person you meet. Look on them as being like a man whose house has caught on fire. Would such a man cry, ‘I’m not leaving until someone tells me why God made this happen’? No. He runs out of a burning house as fast as he can. The same is true of suffering. We must show people how to run away from it as fast as they can. It’s no use spending years discussing whether someone is cursed or loved by the gods.”

The closest fighting was no more than a quarter mile away, and they reached it in a few minutes. One horseman had chased another away from the center of battle. He had gotten close enough to thrust a spear into his enemy’s mount, which had stumbled and thrown its rider. Now both soldiers were on their feet fighting hand-to-hand; they both were experienced enough to use a dagger in one hand and a sword in the other.

As they walked closer, the monks attracted no attention—the two soldiers were blind to everything but their struggle. Even so, the five monks were shaken at the sight of violence. Buddha stopped for a moment to let them regain their nerve.

“When I was a warrior,” he said, “I learned that victory could never be achieved without weapons. We have no weapons, but we will prevail anyway.”

Without a word he walked directly up to the two fighters and without hesitation strode into the space between them.

“Get away, stranger,” one soldier shouted. “If you don’t move, you’ll be hurt.”

“Is that possible?” said Buddha. “Try.”

The two enemies stared at him in disbelief. “You must be insane,” said one. “Run away, monk. If I have to, I’ll slice you through with my blade.”

“That would be interesting to see,” Buddha said. His calmness was so unnerving that the two soldiers lowered their weapons, losing the edge of their fighting rage. From the

sidelines Assaji shouted, "If you touch him, you are hurting a holy man. That's a sin."

Buddha turned and gave him a sharp look. "None of that," he rebuked. He shifted his attention back to the two soldiers. "You both do your duty to the gods, but that hasn't saved you from a lifetime of killing and fear. Why stop now? If you are so reckless with fate that you risk meeting your dead enemies in hell, I won't stop you. I invite you to run me through with your blade. I will even forgive you in advance."

By the time he spoke the last word, the two fighters were hanging their heads. Buddha reached out and lightly touched the daggers and swords, which dropped to the ground. "Shame has made you lose your taste for killing," he said. "Go home and find a better way to live."

"I can't," said one fighter. "If I run away from battle, the king will take away my house; there will be no food for my family."

"I promise you that won't happen," said Buddha. "Your king is going to disband his whole army today."

The two soldiers were amazed and wanted to ask more questions, but Buddha signaled to the five monks and walked on. When they looked over their shoulders, the fighters were gone.

"I've shown you the first way peace can prevail," said Buddha. "Some people can be reached by speaking to their conscience. Those are the ones who already know that they want to find an end to suffering. Through conscience, guilt, and shame, they will recognize their wrong when it is told to them."

"How many people are like that?" asked Assaji.

"Not enough."

Next Buddha led them to where the fighting was more concentrated: clusters of soldiers clashed in a whirling chaos of steel, horses, and shouts. For a moment Buddha stood apart. "What do you see?" he asked.

“Bloodshed and carnage. Something I wouldn’t look upon willingly,” said Assaji.

“Look a little deeper,” said Buddha. “These are people who cannot listen to conscience, not because they are bad but because they are too caught up in action. You cannot preach to someone who is fighting for life and breath, not just in war but in the ordinary struggle of existence.”

Buddha approached the fray, and a wildly flailing sword missed his head by inches. The monks cried out, but Buddha reached out and caught the blade in midair. He seized it from the swordsman, who turned his head with eyes that began to bulge out. Buddha was holding the sharp edges of the blade tight in his fist. The opposing swordsman saw his chance and lunged at his enemy. Buddha reached out and grabbed the second sword by the blade, wrenching it from the soldier’s hand.

The soldiers were stunned with disbelief. “Who are you?” one cried as they fell to their knees.

“I am what you need at this moment,” said Buddha.

He dropped the weapons and walked deeper into the combat. As he got nearer, the fighting calmed. Fighters held their weapons frozen in midair like statues. Buddha seemed to cut an open swath in the battlefield as he passed. The five monks rushed after him in his wake.

“What’s happening?” asked Assaji breathlessly.

“What do you suppose?” said Buddha. “This is a miracle.”

Buddha proceeded through the entire army. “I am showing you another way to prevail,” he said. “Sometimes you must show yourself as you really are. People who are lost in the struggle of existence have become prisoners of illusion. Just remember one thing: you are made of light, and when it is fitting, you may have to prove it.”

Assaji remained baffled by the awe that Buddha was creating among the soldiers, some of whom actually held their hands over their eyes to shield them. To Assaji, however,

Buddha looked completely normal. “Why don’t I see the miracle?” he asked.

“Because you are even more distracted than these soldiers,” said Buddha with a smile. “You keep thinking I’m here to get you killed.”

At that, Assaji suddenly found himself relaxing; he had been as tense as a tightened wire. He exhaled deeply, and then he saw that Buddha was surrounded by an aura of brilliant white light. The army beheld a being of light moving through their midst, and the sight brought them to their knees.

“Master, forgive me. I see now that you can save multitudes,” said Assaji in awe.

“This isn’t salvation,” said Buddha. “Just a glimpse of reality. Everyone is deeply asleep. It will take more than one glimpse to wake them up.”

Vappa, who had been listening close by, said, “No one will ever see me this way.”

“Why not?” said Buddha. “I do already.”

He remained silent as they made their way through the heart of battle. On the fringes one could still hear the clash of war, but as far as the eye could see, every soldier had laid down his weapons. It took half an hour to cross the entire field. The tents of the generals came into view. Buddha pointed to the highest tent pole, which flew a brilliant red and yellow ensign. “My father.” The older generals shivered when they saw the return of the prince from the dead; all the officers bowed low, then they followed in Buddha’s wake as he approached the royal tent.

Buddha parted the tent flap and went inside. In the dim, hot interior, the old king lay on a cot. He had fallen asleep while putting on his armor. He was groaning and turning over restlessly, his arms thrashing. Buddha made a gesture, and Assaji came inside.

“I want you to see everything,” Buddha said. “But keep in a corner for now. We don’t want to overwhelm him.”

Assaji backed away into the shadows. Then Buddha approached the cot and touched his father on the shoulder. Suddhodana didn't start but woke up slowly, rubbing his eyes. It took a moment for his mind to grasp what he was seeing, and three words escaped his mouth separated by long pauses. "Who? No. You!" The old king began to weep.

"Don't be afraid, father." Buddha embraced the old man, and they stood together like that, while to Assaji's surprise Buddha himself was silently weeping. Suddhodana recovered his speech in broken expressions. Where did Siddhartha come from? Who had been beheaded? But more frequently he recriminated himself for being such a fool.

A surge of anger hardened the old king and brought a sudden burst of energy. "Devadatta will pay for this." he said crisply. "I have to fight. This is no place for you. Have some men escort you back to the palace." Suddhodana reached for the chest plate and helmet he was putting on before he fell asleep. He averted his eyes from his son. "I know you are a monk now, Siddhartha, but unless we win this battle, your father will be a beggar." Suddhodana had never reconciled himself to his son's choice, and now his only thought was that the kingdom needed a defender. Instead of stopping him, Buddha stood aside and let the old king armor himself, pick up his sword, and rush from the tent.

"You're going to let him fight?" asked Assaji, disbelieving.

"He's a warrior; his nature is conflict," said Buddha.

"But two seconds ago he was weeping over you. And you were weeping too," said Assaji awkwardly.

"That was love," said Buddha. "Love sometimes weeps; don't be ashamed of it. With some people, an appeal to love prevails."

"Love didn't stop him from running back to fight," said Assaji.

Buddha opened the tent flap. They saw the generals trailing after Suddhodana, who was shouting exhortations the

way he used to when he was young. Some of his staff tried to calm him down, but he ferociously threw them off. After a moment the officers mounted their horses or jumped into chariots. Buddha watched them rush off toward the left flank, where some fighting was still raging.

“What if he’s killed?” asked Assaji anxiously. “Aren’t you here to save your father?”

“This is the moment of faith, when nothing seems to work,” said Buddha, beginning to walk after the departing fighters. “Don’t preach faith the way it’s usually preached, to keep people quiet and forbid them to think on their own. That kind of faith is blind, and being blind, it is useless. Call on faith only when the mind has given up.”

“But sometimes it’s right to give up,” Assaji protested.

“No, dear friend, that’s not true. Never forget that all this is a dream.” Buddha passed his gaze over the dead bodies fallen on either side, the carrion birds picking at their remains, the fleeing horses without a rider. “Winning and losing are the same thing. Both are nothing.”

Buddha quickened his pace. Assaji summoned the other monks to catch up. He said, “This is a profound day for us, master. We will never forget it.”

“Every day is like this,” Buddha replied. “You’ll see.”

Now they arrived at the thick of the fray where Suddhodana, against the earnest entreaties of his officers, was standing in his stirrups and screaming. “Come face me, coward! I am one old man, but you won’t walk away alive.”

From the opposing ranks came a stir, then a single horseman rode out into the space between the two armies. It was Devadatta, fully armored with upraised sword. “I would gladly kill you, old fool,” he shouted. “But half your army follows me already. Surrender or watch your men be killed before sunset.”

“Who is he?” asked Assaji.

“I could give you many answers. My cousin. A lost soul. A man trapped in a nightmare,” said Buddha. “But the truth is that he is an aspect of me.”

Raising his voice, Buddha called, “Devadatta!”

His cousin looked his way, but instead of registering surprise he laughed harshly. “Come to see your last hope die?” he cried. “Tell your father to lay down his arms or I’ll take the throne by force.”

Since convincing Suddhodana that his son was dead, Devadatta had spent his time well. He raised dissent among some garrisons of the king’s army, offering them more fighting and gold once Suddhodana was deposed. He plotted with a neighboring king, Bimbisara, to invade the country so that Devadatta would have overwhelming numbers on his side.

“Stop, cousin, for your own sake,” Buddha said, coming nearer. “This is a mistake.”

“Only for your family,” said Devadatta bitterly. “You’ve held me like a prisoner all my life.”

“Revenge isn’t yours,” said Buddha. “Surrender, and I promise you freedom from your pain.”

Devadatta became enraged. “Surrender to you?” he screamed. “You weak, pious fraud!” He swung his sword in a circle overhead and kicked his horse with his spurs to make it charge. On the other side Suddhodana had lost the will to fight. Without warning, he felt his body drained of energy, and he slumped in the saddle like the old man he was.

Prepared to die, Suddhodana closed his eyes and prayed. He had done that only in the Shiva temple before a battle. But he worried about his soul, so he asked Maya to forgive him for letting her die. He thanked the gods for allowing him to live long enough to see his lost son once again. And finally, since he was what he was, the king prayed fervently that Devadatta would die by violence and go directly to hell. When he opened his eyes again, Suddhodana thought that his last prayer had come true because Devadatta was not hard upon him with his

sword. Instead, the traitor was rolling in the dust, and his mount had bolted. Confusion broke out in the ranks.

The next instant made matters clear. A lone soldier had run up at the last moment and cut the cinch to Devadatta's saddle, unhorsing him. That soldier was standing over him now, ripping off his helmet. It was Channa, who shouted at Suddhodana, "Get out of here! I can't kill a whole army for one old fool."

Suddhodana backed up until he was safe among the ranks of his men. He watched as Devadatta leaped to his feet. The two fighters circled each other, swords held forward.

"So you still pick fights you can't lose," Channa snarled. "Not today. Today, nobody becomes king without going through me."

Devadatta lunged with his weapon, hoping for a clean kill with his first strike. Channa stepped aside quickly, and his enemy rushed by, almost losing his balance. With an arrogant smile, Channa waved for Devadatta to come at him again.

"Why waste time?" he taunted. "This low-caste scum was always the one who would kill you. I'll rub a little of my blood in your wounds to make sure you get to hell."

Devadatta had gained some control over his rage and backed off warily. All this time the five monks stared at Buddha, waiting for him to intervene. "Master, all day you've shown us the things we can do," whispered Assaji. "Why do you stand back now?"

"It only seems that I'm standing back."

The authority in Buddha's voice silenced Assaji. Devadatta and Channa continued circling each other, making tentative jabs to see if they could catch the other off guard.

"Their whole lives have come to this moment," said Buddha. "Yet in an instant a life can be thrown away. Watch how easy it is." He bent over and picked up a round pebble. With a deft toss he threw it, and the pebble landed behind Devadatta's right heel. He took his next step backward and

slipped on it, stumbling to one knee. Channa's eyes flashed toward the spectators. He had been so intent on attacking Devadatta that he hadn't even noticed Buddha among the crowd. His face flushed deep red, but in the same instant he couldn't stop himself from leaping on his enemy and pressing his sword to Devadatta's throat. No one would ever know if he intended to give Devadatta a moment's final mercy because Suddhodana's voice filled the air. "No! Hold your hand."

Channa hesitated; he knew if he disobeyed that he would be executed. His mind was confused, having to absorb the fact of Siddhartha's return at the very moment that he was revenging Siddhartha's death. Suddhodana came forward.

"You are forbidden to kill him," he said with command. "Devadatta is still a prince."

Channa let go of Devadatta's head and pulled his blade away. He gave a curt bow of obedience. This was the moment his enemy had waited for. Devadatta raised his sword and stabbed Channa in the back. The blade pierced Channa's aorta, and he crumpled to the ground. Devadatta got to his feet, panting and dripping with sweat. Within seconds, Suddhodana's men had captured him and hauled him away. The enemy ranks stirred with confusion, then the trumpets sounded and they beat a retreat. Suddhodana gave orders to let them go; without Devadatta to lead them, Bimbisara's men would sneak back home, and the rebels from Suddhodana's army had no choice but to follow them into banishment.

The only ones who remained on the field were Buddha and the five monks, who were in shock. "Wasn't that your friend?" asked Kondana. "You caused him to be killed."

Buddha replied, "Every single life is woven into the web of karma, which has no beginning or end. Until you accept that every life is woven into every other, you will never know who you really are."

"So Channa must surrender to death today?" asked Kondana.

“Death is not the point,” said Buddha. “As long as you are caught in karma’s web, death comes with birth. The two are inseparable. Find the part of you that is unborn; then you will be free of birth and death together.”

As he taught them, Buddha was heading back to the royal tent. Devadatta was tied to a stake, and a hooded man began to whip him. By his side was a broad scimitar lying on the ground. Buddha looked away and walked into the tent. Suddhodana stood over the cot where Channa lay, barely breathing.

“I sent orders for a physician,” Suddhodana said mournfully. “But it should have been for a priest.”

Buddha knelt beside the cot. “What can I do for you, dear Channa?”

His words seemed to make the dying man revive. He opened his eyes slightly, the lids fluttering. Instead of looking at Buddha, Channa pinned Suddhodana with a bitter glance. “Your pride has killed me,” he muttered. His words were clotted, and a trickle of blood appeared on his lips.

“Look at me, not at him,” said Buddha gently.

“I can’t. I’ve sinned against you.”

“Why do you talk of sin? Do you think you’re going to die?” asked Buddha. His voice was so calm and tender that Channa stared at him. “I’ve come to show you the one who was never born and therefore cannot die.”

Buddha closed Channa’s eyes. No one in the tent ever found out what he made Channa see, but the vision created a smile of deep bliss on Channa’s face. He gave a muffled, ecstatic cry, then his head fell back on the pillow. His stillness would have been mistaken for death except for the slight rise and fall of his chest.

“How can he survive such a wound?” asked Assaji.

“That’s the one advantage of dreaming,” said Buddha. “You can’t be killed unless you want to be. Let him decide. It’s

no one's dream but Channa's. He will do what he will do.”

Buddha gathered Suddhodana, who was so overwhelmed by the day's events that he was on the verge of collapse, and the others and led them all outside. The old man allowed himself to be half carried on Buddha's shoulder, but he stiffened with rage when he beheld Devadatta, who had been whipped so severely that he was unconscious. The king was about to order that the traitor be revived so that he could witness his own execution. Then he noticed something. Everyone present was bowing on one knee to Buddha or prostrating themselves on the ground.

“Why is this?” Suddhodana asked.

“Let me show you,” said Buddha. “In your heart you want to kill Devadatta, even after he is helpless and defeated.” The old king hung his head slightly but didn't deny it. Buddha said, “One who kills a killer takes on his karma, and so the wheel of suffering never stops. Let it stop here, today, for you.” His father trembled, nodding almost imperceptibly. “I will show you how to make this a kingdom of peace,” said Buddha.

No one saw him do anything unusual, but it was as if the clouds passed away from the face of the sun. The mood of war lifted; the atmosphere became calm and pure.

As they looked around, the Sakyan soldiers seemed not to recognize where they were. Many stared at their weapons as if they had never seen these strange implements.

Buddha leaned closer to Assaji. “I begin this new age so that you can continue it forever. Remember that.”

Devadatta was cut loose and his unconscious body carried away. He woke up that night in his bed at the palace. His room was sealed and guarded for three days while he contemplated what had happened to him. At first he simply felt hollow and numb. Being dedicated to evil had supplied him with a ferocious energy that he couldn't summon back. On the night of the third day, he tried the handle and found the door to his room open. Cautiously, Devadatta looked up and down the

corridor, which was empty. Noises came from the great hall, and after considering whether to run, he felt an impulse to go toward the sound. His whipping at the stake had been so severe that it befuddled his memory, and Devadatta wasn't even sure how the battle had ended or who was king.

No one saw him lingering at the entrance of the hall. There was a great celebration under way. The entire court sat at table while servants rushed back and forth with platters of meat and saffron rice, ripe mangoes and honeyed berries. Suddhodana presided at the head. To one side at a lower table the five monks were eating rice and lentils with Buddha. The room was filled with a quiet joy that the palace had not seen in years.

Devadatta paused, examining the festivities, then turned and left.

"Did you see that?" asked Assaji, who was on Buddha's right hand.

"Yes."

"He was your sworn enemy, and now you're letting him leave?"

"Devadatta is the one person in the world who could never leave me," said Buddha. "That's his blessing, but he saw it as a curse. He's tied to me by a rope he can never let go of."

"Then he'll be back?" asked Assaji, not relishing the thought.

"What choice does he have?" said Buddha. "When you're obsessed with hatred for someone, it's inevitable that you will return one day as his disciple."

"Master, I just hope he's better when he comes back," Assaji said doubtfully.

"He will still be arrogant and proud," said Buddha. "But it won't matter. The fire of passion burns out eventually. Then you dig through the ashes and discover a gem. You pick it up;

you look at it with disbelief. The gem was inside you all the time. It is yours to keep forever. It is *buddha*.”

Epilogue

For a storyteller, it would be ideal if Buddha's life came to a spectacular end. We're holding our breath for it. First came the fairy-tale beginning as a handsome prince, then a second act with a wandering monk who goes through all manner of trials and suffering, reaching a brilliant climax when enlightenment is achieved in a single night under the bodhi tree. Where did this stunning life finally wind up?

Squarely back on earth, as it turns out. Buddha lived quietly for another forty-five years, traveling throughout northern India as a renowned teacher before dying at the ripe old age of eighty. The cause of death was eating a bad piece of pork, an embarrassingly humble and mundane way to depart.

To satisfy our dramatic longings, we have to turn to the incidental characters in the tale. The ones who were intimates of Siddhartha enjoyed a warm reunion with him. His wife, Yashodhara, and son, Rahula, became devotees of Buddha, which seems fitting enough. They were revered to the end of their days. Other characters had a more curious fate. The ever-widening circle of monks around Buddha, known as the *Sangha*, came to include two misfits, his archenemy, Devadatta, and the rough-hewn warrior Channa. According to tradition, Devadatta remained proud and resentful; even as a disciple he caused trouble. In one famous episode Devadatta tries to kill Buddha by starting a rockslide; in another he gets an elephant drunk on liquor and sends it on a rampage against the Compassionate One. (Buddha deflects the danger in both cases.) As often happens, the villain of the piece is too much fun to let go, so there are other stories of political intrigue with a neighboring prince named Ajatashatru and more mundane tales of Devadatta objecting to the rules Buddha laid down for

his monks. A storyteller has a hard time making much drama out of ashram politics.

Following the rules didn't sit well with Channa, either. Having given up his role as brave charioteer, Channa chafed at being reduced to the status of a holy monk. His chief sin was pride. He never let anyone forget that he had been Siddhartha's best friend. He treated Buddha with too much familiarity, causing distress among the other devotees. At a certain point Channa's misbehavior became too much for even Buddha's tolerance. The head disciple, Ananda, who historically was Buddha's cousin, was sent to reprimand him, and from there the road divides. In one version Channa sullenly takes his scolding and reforms. In the other, he sinks into despair and commits suicide.

But we would be wrong to be disappointed in our hero. Enlightenment was just the beginning of Buddha's spiritual ascent, which was spectacular by any measure. Buddhism caused an earthquake in the spiritual life of India, crushing the privileges of the Brahmin caste and raising even the despised untouchables to spiritual dignity.

Buddha blew through the temples like a strong wind and with the simplicity of genius reduced the human predicament to one key issue: suffering. If suffering is a constant in every life, he said, then until there's an end to suffering, enlightenment is pointless. Equally pointless is talk of God or the gods, heaven and hell, sin, redemption, the soul, and all the rest. This was reform of the severest kind, and a lot didn't stick. People wanted God. Buddha refused to speak on the subject of whether God even existed. He adamantly denied that he himself was divine. People wanted the comfort of rituals and ceremonies. Buddha shunned ceremony. He wanted each individual to look inside and find liberation through a personal journey that began in the physical world and ended in Nirvana, a state of pure, eternal consciousness. Nirvana is present in everyone, he taught, but Nirvana is like pure water lying deep beneath the earth. Reaching it requires concentration, devotion, and diligent work.

It's no wonder that Buddha's call to awakening proved so enticing and so difficult. The Middle Way, which gained its name because it was neither too harsh nor too easy, proved very appealing, but the journey to Nirvana is solitary and contains little in the way of entertaining scenery. Yet there was no arguing against the teaching. Everything Buddha preached grows logically from the First Noble Truth, which also happens to be the first thing Buddha said to the five monks after he became enlightened: life contains suffering. The next three teachings sound more like modern psychotherapy than conventional religion:

FIRST NOBLE TRUTH: Life contains suffering.

SECOND NOBLE TRUTH: Suffering has a cause, and the cause can be known.

THIRD NOBLE TRUTH: Suffering can be brought to an end.

FOURTH NOBLE TRUTH: The path to end suffering has eight parts.

Now we've gone beyond the role of the storyteller, since these four simple statements created an explosion of theology that spread throughout Asia and the rest of the world. Thanks to Buddha's decades of teaching, a cadre of disciples totally committed to the Buddhist path crossed the Himalayas and journeyed everywhere it was possible for sandals to tread. The list of cultures that these ascetic wanderers revolutionized is staggering: Tibet, Nepal, China, Japan, Korea, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia, Burma, Vietnam, and far into Malaysia and Indonesia. In many cases a handful of Buddhist missionaries actually created a new culture. Any outside observer can only stand back in awe.

Why did people accept this new teaching so readily? Because the First Noble Truth was undeniable. People knew that they were suffering, and instead of showing a way out, their old religions gave them surrogates, in the form of dogma, prayers, rituals, and the like. At its simplest, Buddhism walked

into the village square and said, “Here are eight things that will open the way to peace instead of pain.” The Eightfold Path asks for each person to change how the mind works, plucking out what is wrong, inefficient, and superstitious, then exchanging those outworn habits for increasing clarity. In other words, the waking-up process, which Buddha experienced in one night, is laid out as a lifelong program:

- Right view or perspective
- Right intention
- Right speech
- Right action
- Right livelihood
- Right effort
- Right mindfulness
- Right concentration

Some of these steps sound natural. We all want to believe that our actions and words are virtuous. We don’t want to go wrong in our effort and intentions. Other parts of the path need special guidance. What is right mindfulness? Right concentration? These aspects have their roots in the meditation practices of Yoga, which Buddha also reformed and brought within reach of ordinary people.

As a storyteller, I didn’t feel it was my place to spread Buddhism. That’s best left to the modern equivalents of the wandering missionaries who first preached Buddhism. It would be unseemly for me to step on their toes. But I’d like to speak to you, the reader, who might be coming to Buddha from the cold. I came to Buddha that way, and I asked the obvious question: What can this teaching do for me? Is there something that will open my eyes and make me more awake, right this minute?

Personally, I found three things. They are known as the three Dharma seals, or to put it in plain English, three basic facts about Being. They spoke to me far more than the Middle

Way because of their universality, which extends far beyond the boundaries of religion.

1. Dukkha

Life is unsatisfactory. Pleasure in the physical world is transient. Pain inevitably follows. Therefore, nothing we experience can be deeply satisfying. There is no resting place in change.

2. Anicca

Nothing is permanent. All experience is swept away in flux. Cause and effect is endless and confusing. Therefore one can never find clarity or permanence.

3. Anatta

The separate self is unreliable and ultimately unreal. We apply words like *soul* and *personality* to something that is fleeting and ghostly. Our attempts to make the self real never end but also never succeed. Therefore, we cling for reassurance to an illusion.

READING THIS, CAN anyone escape being shaken to the core? Buddha wasn't just a kindly teacher who wanted people to find peace. He was a radical surgeon who examined them and said, "No wonder you feel sick. All this unreal stuff has filled you up, and now we have to get rid of it." Naturally, a lot of listeners ran back to conventional religion, and just as many ran back into materialism, which promises that body, mind, and the physical world are absolutely real.

Why should we accept Buddha's word that they aren't? That, I think, is the crucial question. There's not much challenge in accepting that one's life contains suffering, and only a small challenge in accepting that flux and change create dissatisfaction. Both facts seem psychologically self-evident. But to accept that the entire world, and everyone in it, is an illusion? That's an enormous challenge, and it requires a complete shift in consciousness to meet it.

The word *illusion* has a host of meanings, and some are very enticing. The illusion, for example, that when you fall in love it will last forever. The illusion that you will never die. The illusion that ignorance is bliss. Buddha saw the danger hidden in these enticements. He rarely spoke harshly, but I can imagine him bursting all these bubbles: love ends, everyone dies, ignorance is folly. But if he had stopped there, Buddha would have wound up a tiresome moralist.

His definition of illusion was so absolute it almost freezes the blood. Whatever can be seen, heard, or touched is unreal. Whatever you cling to as permanent is unreal. Whatever the mind can think of is unreal. Does that leave anything free from the withering grip of illusion?

No.

Yet once we get over our shock, Buddha declares that with a shift in consciousness, reality reveals itself. Not as a thing. Not as a sensation. Not even as a wisp of thought. Reality is purely itself. It is the ground of existence, the source from which everything else is projected. In the most basic terms, Buddhism exchanges a world of infinite projections for the single state of Being. A freedom so complete it doesn't have to think of freedom or say its name.

Which brings me to the subversive reason I decided to write a novel on the life of Buddha. By telling his story from the inside (early on I intended to call the book *I, Buddha*), I could trace every step that led Siddhartha to stop believing in the world. His tale isn't really that of a romantic prince, suffering monk, or triumphant saint. It's a universal soul journey that begins asleep and ends awake. Siddhartha woke up to the truth, which sounds inspiring, but in this case the truth demolished his entire self. It overturned every belief, purified every sense, and brought total clarity to the mind's confusion. In sum, this book has been a kind of seduction, coaxing the reader step by step toward a vision that none of us was brought up to see. Through the eyes of Buddha, the root of suffering is illusion, and the only way out of illusion is to stop believing in the separate self and the world that supports

the separate self. No spiritual message has ever been so radical. None remains so terribly urgent.

The Art of Non-Doing

A Practical Guide to Buddhism

After being inspired by Buddha's life, the most important thing is not to let him slip through your fingers. This can easily happen. First of all, because he didn't want anyone to hold on to him. Buddha was like a supernova exploding in the sky, spreading light in all directions. Before the explosion you could locate him in time and space. He was a person like any other, however brilliant and charismatic. But after the explosion known as enlightenment, he turned into something else, something very impersonal. Call it pure spirit, essence, or transcendent wisdom. By any name, he was no longer a person, which makes for special difficulties. How do you follow a teacher who is everywhere at once?

I can imagine sitting down with a reader and being asked that question, which would lead to quite a few more.

How am I supposed to follow someone who constantly insisted that he was no longer a person and didn't have a self?

Ideally, you follow him by losing your own self. Which seems impossible, since it's your self that's fascinated by him. It's your self that's suffering and wants to be rid of suffering. The primary message of Buddhism is that this self cannot accomplish anything real. It must find a way to disappear, just as Buddha did.

The self reaches its goal by not being the self? It sounds like a paradox.

Yes, but Buddhists found three ways to live the wisdom their teacher left behind. The first way was social, forming groups of disciples into a Sangha, like the group of monks and nuns that Buddha gathered in his lifetime. The Sangha exists to establish a spiritual lifestyle. People remind themselves of the teaching and keep the Buddhist vision alive. They meditate together and create an atmosphere of peace.

The second way to follow Buddha is ethical, centered on the value of compassion. Buddha was known as The Compassionate One, a being who loved all of humanity without judgment. Buddhist ethics bring the same attitude into everyday life. A Buddhist practices being kind and seeing others without judgment, but in addition displays love and reverence for life itself. Buddhist morality is peaceful, accepting, and joyous.

The third way to follow Buddha is mystical. You take to heart the message of non-self. You do everything possible to break the bonds of attachment that keep you trapped in the illusion that you are a separate self. Here your aim is to tiptoe out of the material world even as your body remains in it. Ordinary people are doing things all day, but in your heart you've turned your attention to non-doing, as the Buddhists call it. Non-doing isn't passivity but a state of openness to all possibilities.

If I practice non-doing, what would I actually do? It still seems like a paradox.

The third way confronts Buddha's most enigmatic side. How can you shed the separate self when it's the only thing you've known? The process sounds frightening, for one thing, because there's no guarantee. Once you accomplish "ego death," as it's often called, what will be left? You might wind up enlightened, but you also might wind up a blank, a passive non-self with no interests or desires. People find the Buddhist path rigorous because you are asked to re-examine everything you think will get you ahead in life—money, possessions,

status, accomplishments—and see them as a source of suffering. For example, having money doesn't directly cause suffering, but it ties you to the illusion by hiding from sight the fact that there's another way to live that's actually real. Money, like possessions and status, creates a treadmill that brings one desire after another.

So enlightenment is the same as having no desires?

You have to understand “no desires” in a positive sense, as fulfillment. At the moment a musician is performing, there's a state of no-desire because he feels fulfilled. At the moment you're eating a wonderful meal, hunger is fulfilled. Buddha taught that there is a state, known as Nirvana, where desire is irrelevant. Everything desire is trying to achieve exists in Nirvana already. You don't have to pursue one desire after another in a futile quest to end suffering. Instead, you go right to the source of Being, which is neither full nor empty. It just is.

Do you still want to live after that?

Nirvana is no longer about life and death, which are opposites. Buddha wanted to free people from all opposites. If you are following his teachings the second way, through morality and ethics, then being good, truthful, nonviolent, and compassionate is important. You don't want to practice the opposite behavior. But if you follow Buddha the third way, the mystical way of non-doing, duality is the very thing you try to dissolve. You go beyond good and evil, which is scary to many people.

What is the non-self?

It's who you are when there are no personal attachments. This sounds mystical, but we shouldn't be distracted by semantics. The non-self is natural; it's rooted in everyday

experience. When you wake up in the morning there's a moment before your mind gets filled with all the things you have to do today. In that moment you exist without a self. You don't think about your name or your bank account; you don't even think about your spouse and children. You just are. Enlightenment extends that state and deepens it. You aren't burdened by having to remember who you are, ever again.

When I wake up in the morning I remember who I am almost immediately. How does that change?

By gradually shifting your allegiance. Consider how you relate to your body. You mostly forget about it. Heartbeat, metabolism, body temperature, electrolyte balance—literally dozens of processes go on automatically, and your nervous system coordinates them perfectly without interference from the conscious mind. Buddha suggests that you can let go of many things that you're certain you must control. Instead of devoting so much effort and struggle to thinking, planning, running after pleasure, and avoiding pain, you can surrender and put those functions on automatic, also. This is accomplished gradually by a practice called mindfulness.

You mean, I simply stop thinking?

You stop investing yourself in thinking, because Buddha teaches that you haven't been in control of your mind anyway. The mind is a series of fleeting, impermanent events, and trying to ground yourself in impermanence is an illusion. Time is exactly the same, a sequence of fleeting events that has no solid basis. Once you hear this teaching, you put it into practice through mindfulness. Whenever you are tempted by the illusion, you remind yourself that it's not real. In a way, a better term might be *re-mindfulness*.

The process of shifting your consciousness takes time. This is an evolution, not a revolution. We're all pulled in by the temptation to choose between A and B. Duality makes us

believe that making good decisions and avoiding bad ones is all-important. Buddha disagrees—he says that getting out of duality is all-important, and you'll never escape as long as you keep burying yourself deeper into the game of "A-or-B?" Reality isn't A or B. It's both and it's neither. Mindfulness keeps you aware of that fact.

How am I to understand "both and neither"?

You can't, not with the mind. The mind is basically a machine that processes the world only in terms of "I want this" and "I don't want that." Buddha taught that you can step outside the machinery and simply watch it working. You witness the whole fantastic jumble of desires, fears, wishes, and memories that is the mind. When you gain practice doing that in meditation, things change. You begin to be aware of yourself in a simpler way, without so much mental jumble. In time your allegiance shifts, and the space between thoughts—the silent gap—dominates instead of thoughts.

Is that Nirvana?

No, it's just a sign that you are successfully practicing mindfulness. The silent gap between thoughts goes by too fast for anyone to live there. You have to give the gap a chance to expand, and at the same time silence deepens. It may sound strange, but your mind can be silent the whole time it's also thinking. Ordinarily, silence and thought are considered opposites, but when you go beyond opposites, they merge. You identify with the timeless source of thought rather than the thoughts emerging from it.

What advantage does this bring? Assuming I take the time and effort to achieve such a state.

One can speak of the advantages in glowing terms that sound very alluring. You gain peace; you no longer suffer.

Death no longer holds any fear. You stand unshakably on your own Being. In reality the gains are highly individual and proceed at their own pace. Everyone is in a different state of unreality that's highly personal. I may be obsessive, while the person next to me may be anxious and the person next to him depressed. In meditation these knots of discord and conflict begin to unravel of their own accord. Yet there's always an evolutionary unfolding. In your own way you walk the path to peace, non-suffering, fearlessness, and everything else Buddha exemplified.

From the outside this third way of following Buddha looks mystical, but over time it becomes as natural as breathing. Buddhism survives today and thrives all around the world because it is so open-ended. You don't have to obey a set of rules or worship God or the gods. You don't even have to be spiritual. All you have to do is look into yourself and yearn to become clear, to wake up and be complete. Buddhism counts on the fact that everyone possesses at least a bit of these motivations. Mindfulness and meditation form the basis of Buddhist practice—although every sect and teacher has a particular slant on them. Za-zen, the style of Buddhist meditation practiced in Japan, isn't the same as Vipasana meditation in South Asia. In the end, however, Buddhism is a do-it-yourself project, and that's the secret of its appeal in the modern world. Don't we all ultimately concentrate on personal suffering and what our individual fate will be? Buddha asked for nothing else as a starting point, and yet he promised that the end point would be eternity.

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As always, my family and everyone at the Chopra Center provided their support and love. I am deeply grateful and hope that this book makes you proud.

Author's Note

Whoever sees me sees the teaching.

—BUDDHA

In writing this book, I took a deep breath and created new characters and incidents in the life of one of the most famous people who ever lived. Famous, but still very obscure. I wanted to bring Buddha out of the mists of time, to fill him out in flesh and blood while still preserving his mystery. Fact blended into fantasy centuries ago in the story of the prince who became a living god. Or is “god” the very thing he didn’t want to be? Was his deepest wish to disappear from the material world, remembered only as an inspiration of perfection?

The Buddha story, as it gathered momentum for two millennia, became chock-full of miracles and gods that got stuck onto its surface. Speaking about himself, Buddha never mentioned miracles or gods. He held a doubtful view of both. He showed no interest in being revered as a personality; none of his many sermons mentions his family life or gives much personal information at all. Unlike Christ in the New Testament, he certainly didn’t see himself as divine.

Instead, he saw himself as “someone who is awake,” which is what the word *Buddha* means. That’s the person I’ve tried to capture in this book. Here in all his mystery is the principal human being who ever gained enlightenment, who spent his long life trying to wake up the rest of us. Everything he knew, he knew from arduous, sometimes bitter experience. He went through extreme suffering—almost to the death—and emerged with something incredibly precious. Buddha literally

became the truth. “Whoever sees me sees the teaching,” he said, “and whoever sees the teaching sees me.”

I wrote this book as a sacred journey, fictionalized in many of its externals but psychologically true, I hope, to what the seeker’s path feels like. In all three phases of his life—Siddhartha the prince, Gautama the monk, and Buddha the Compassionate One—he was as mortal as you and I, yet he attained enlightenment and was raised to the rank of an immortal. The miracle is that he got there following a heart as human as yours and mine, and just as vulnerable.

Deepak Chopra

Credits

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The *New York Times* Bestselling Author

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CHOPRA

GOD

A Story of Revelation



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Deepak Chopra



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Prologue

Like a car with two steering wheels, the world has been guided by two forces, the spiritual and the secular, that fight for control. The secular has seized the advantage today, but for many centuries the power lay with spirituality. Visionaries could shape the future as much as kings, often more. A king was anointed by God, but visionaries were visited by God. They heard his message personally before appearing in public to announce what God wanted people to do.

I became fascinated by the perplexing situation that visionaries find themselves thrust into. Very few asked for this power to affect other people. God wrenched them from the comfort of everyday life and guided their steps. The voice they heard in their heads wasn't their own, but divinely inspired. What was that like? On one hand, it must have been terrifying. In a world that made a spectacle of feeding martyrs to lions, crucifying saints as enemies of the state, and jealously guarding old religions, the voice of God could be pronouncing a death sentence. On the other hand, to experience the divine was ecstatic, as witnessed by the mystical poets in every culture who had a love affair with the divine. That mixture of rapture and torment became the seed of this book.

“God” is an empty term except as it finds expression through the revelations of all the saints, prophets, and mystics of history. They exist to plant the seeds of spirituality as direct experience rather than a matter of hope and faith. Yet no one can say that God was revealed in one consistent shape delivering one consistent message—quite the opposite. Somehow revelations can be divine and contradictory at the same time.

Why doesn't God just say what's on his (or her) mind and let it spread to every people? The contradiction in holy messages arose because of our own limitations. Let's assume that God is infinite. Our minds are not equipped to perceive the infinite. We perceive what we are prepared to see and

know. Infinity reveals itself in bits and pieces tailored to each society, epoch, and habit of mind. We label as God mere glimpses of higher reality, like seeing one figure in Da Vinci's *Last Supper*. A glimpse fills us with wonder, but the whole thing has been missed.

With that in mind, I've turned this novel into a meditation about God in us. Only half is fictional, devoted to ten visionaries entranced by the words that God spoke to them. The other half consists of reflections on what God meant when he singled out these sages, seers, prophets, and poets. The message wasn't the same each time—Job in the Old Testament heard something very different from what St. Paul in the New Testament heard—yet one sees a pattern.

God evolves. That's why he keeps speaking and never grows silent. The very basic fact that God has shifted between "he," "she," "it," and none of the above shows how changeable the divine presence is. But to say that God evolves implies that he began in an immature state and then grew into fullness, when every faith holds that God is infinite to begin with. What actually evolved was human understanding. For thousands of years, perhaps as far back as cave dwellers, the human mind held a capacity for higher reality. Sacred paintings and statues are as ancient as civilization, preceding written language and probably even agriculture.

Nearness to God is a constant, not just in human history, but in human nature. If we are connected to our souls, the connection is permanent, even if our attention falters. We think that God changes, because our own perception waxes and wanes. The messages keep coming, though, and God keeps showing different faces. Sometimes the whole notion of the divine gets hidden, when secular forces snatch the steering wheel and attempt to drive alone. But the force of spirituality never fully surrenders. God stands for our need to know ourselves, and as awareness evolves, so does God. This journey never ends. At this moment somewhere in the world a person is waking up in the middle of the night hearing a message that feels uncanny, as if arriving from another reality.

Actually, there must be many such visitations every night, and the people who step forth to announce what they've heard form a motley crew of crazies, artists, avatars, rebels, and saints.

I've always wanted to join this motley crew, and in the following pages I get to imagine that I belong with them. Don't we all, at some level, want to join the outsiders? Their stories tear at our hearts and uplift our souls. The lessons they learned took the human race down unknown roads. One could do worse than to jump the track of everyday life and follow them.

Deepak Chopra

April 2012

1

Job

“I Am the Lord Thy God”

“Where does the world end?” the father asked.

His son, Job, wasn’t prepared for being questioned. It was spring. Outside their tent the first warm breezes carried the pleasant noise of birds and frisky lambs. The boy’s friends were kicking a leather ball across the fields.

“I asked you a question.”

Job pulled at his sandal straps and stared at the carpeted dirt floor. “The world ends at the city walls, where the demons are locked out.”

This seemed reasonable to a ten-year-old. He had been warned about demons very early, and their names, such as Moloch and Astaroth, stuck in his mind. Claws and fangs held a dread fascination. When the winter cold drove the shepherds back inside the city gates, Job felt trapped, but he was forbidden to venture where he might inhale a demon as easily as a gnat.

His father shook his head. “Try again. Where does the world end?”

A big man, Job’s father loomed over him; he wore a menacing look, which was out of place in a weaver who was almost as easy with his children as a woman. This time, though, Job knew without thinking that the look was dangerous.

“The world ends where Judea meets the land of war,” he replied. This had to be right. Their green valley, known as Uz, petered out into the brown scorching desert, like milk spilled

from a jug that flows until the sand drinks it up. The difference was that the land of war drank blood.

But his father still loomed. “One last time, boy. Where does the world end?”

Now the boy was tongue-tied with bewilderment. He lowered his eyes. Suddenly, he was struck a hard blow on the side of his head, hard enough to hurl him flat on the ground, where he lay, very still. When he stopped seeing stars, Job stared at his father, who was bending over him, examining him the way you examine a wounded goat for maggots.

“The world ends here,” his father grunted. He suspended his brawny arm over Job’s face. “Don’t ever forget my fist.”

Why was he acting this way? There was no chance that the boy would cry. The blow was unfair. A pride known to small children rose in him. He had been insulted, and insults deserve contempt, not tears. But his father’s fist remained clenched, and Job wouldn’t risk a second blow. He bit his lip and wore a mask until his father, having made the point, straightened up and strode out of the tent without another word.

He had dropped something and left it behind. A scrap of cloth, fine white wool with a purple stripe in it. Job only just noticed it when his mother came rushing in, wringing her hands, which were wet from the washtub. There was no time to tell her what had happened. There wasn’t time for a word, in fact, before her face crumpled and she let out a shriek. She grabbed up the scrap of cloth and pressed it to her cheek.

Job was stunned. His mother was a dignified woman, the kind who turned away rather than be watched suckling a baby. Job had never seen her anything but fully dressed. Suddenly she tore at her black shift and almost ripped it away from her breast. It took a moment before her strangled sobs formed into a word the boy could understand.

“Rebekah!”

His sister? Why would his mother call out her name? In his confusion, Job was lost until a fact dawned, a simple fact now

full of terror. His older sister wore a fine white undergarment. Purple dye from Tyre was expensive, but she was betrothed, and the groom's mother had paid a visit. The two families were pleased with the match, and before she left, the groom's mother presented Job's mother with a ball of purple yarn. This was immediately woven into the hem of Rebekah's white skirt, so that when she walked, a flick of purple could be seen at her ankles.

"She's dead?" Job murmured, afraid to ask the question, but more afraid not to know. His sister had torn the scrap from her clothing—or someone else had.

His mother grabbed him to her breast and squeezed him tight. He squirmed, feeling the hot skin under her bodice. He could hardly breathe, but she wouldn't let go; the boy began to gasp.

"Job!"

His father's voice shouted for him. At the same time the sound of women running toward the tent made his mother's body slump. The running feet entered. Suddenly the boy was drowned in wailing.

His father shouted again, and Job broke free. Running outside, he looked over his shoulder. In the darkness of the tent his mother was enfolded by a dozen hands clutching at her, like a baby being yanked by midwives into a terrifying birth. Job wanted to protect his mother. He would have run back to tear her from the clutching hands except that his father whirled him around.

"You understand now?" his father demanded.

How could he possibly understand? Seeing his bewildered eyes, his father crouched down.

"God gave us this place and made it beautiful. But he didn't blind the eyes of strangers. They are jealous. They snatch away what is beautiful, and they know that they are evil, so they hide in the night."

Now it was dawning. Roads carried travelers past their city. Sometimes the strangers came in a trickle, as traders or pilgrims to Jerusalem. No, the pilgrims were not to be called strangers, only the others. But when the trickle became a torrent, armies tramped on the roads. The land of war was brought to their doorstep.

“A battle?” asked Job. He wasn’t afraid. In two years he would have to stand ready at the city walls, in case the invaders from Persia or beyond killed the men and older boys. He was already armed with an iron-tipped stick. In two years he might even be as tall as a spear.

“Not a battle, my son. A raid, by cowards, by men worse than animals.”

Whatever blow had fallen, it made his father suddenly weak-kneed, and as he reached to hold his boy’s shoulders straight, his own hands trembled. He couldn’t bear to let Job see his face creased with tears. The boy didn’t know that this was the reason his father stood up and ran away without a word. Only he never forgot. The day his father struck him to the ground was the day his sister, Rebekah, died. Probably she had gone to the well with an empty jug balanced on her head to fill. Probably she was smiling and then vaguely disappointed when she found that no other women or girls were gathered there to gossip. Were the dun-colored wrens who dipped in and out of the water singing, or did they know?

Rebekah would have had a minute to guess why she found herself alone, would have thrown the jug to the ground and heard it shatter. In two or three steps, not enough to escape, the raiders would have been upon her. When the men of Uz went outside the walls later, to the spring that was circled with stones to make a well, they found drops of blood. The girl had struggled, and she had torn a scrap of cloth from her undergarment. It was white wool, woven by her father, but it could have been a note written in ink.

Forget me. I am defiled. We are lost to one another. Forget me, my dear ones.

The circle of wailing women didn't leave her mother's side. Job and his father slept outside the tent that night. The sky looked darker than the boy ever remembered it. He didn't remember falling asleep, but he woke up at dawn, seeing a shadowy figure emerge from the tent flap. Suddenly he had an image of his mother creeping away to drown herself in the well. It was a shallow well, but if she was determined and lay face down in it—

“Boy, wake up.”

Job opened his eyes and realized that he had been having a bad dream. His father sat on the ground next to him; he handed his son a bowl of curds with grain mixed in. With a nod Job took it. He was sure when he had rolled up in a sheepskin to go to sleep that he would never want to eat again, but now he was ravenous. He scooped up the food with his cupped fingers, watching to see what his father would do next. A child, if well loved, will give a parent a second chance, but Job felt the bruised spot on the side of his head where it had hit the floor. He waited. At first his father sat motionless, as if deciding what kind of man he would turn into that day. His silence began to make Job nervous, until a moment later when his father arose and walked around to the other side of the tent, where his loom was set up. Then there was the familiar clacking sound of his work, a sound Job always found reassuring.

When he had finished eating, the boy walked to where the loom stood; in spring all the weavers worked out in the open if the weather was good. His father was the first one to start; the sun was still half sunk below the horizon. Job watched him without speaking. The rest of their lives would fall under the shadow of the raid. He didn't know particulars. Would they hold funeral rites without a body? Would a party of men strap spears to their pack animals and try to rescue her? For a long time his father threw the shuttle, saying nothing.

“God blesses his people.”

When the sentence came out, Job was startled. He wondered if grief had turned his father's brain. The words were repeated, louder this time, as if his father wanted the surrounding tents to hear him.

“God blesses his people. We bring misfortune on ourselves. No one is without sin.”

His father addressed no one in particular except, perhaps, the sky. Now he gazed at Job, as if noticing him for the first time.

“Do you understand?” he said.

The boy shook his head. Until the day before, he had considered his father perfect. The boy never thought about God; he had no need. His own father provided everything, knew everything. What was he saying, that he had caused the crime against Rebekah? From deep inside, Job wanted to cry, “Stop it! You didn't kill her.” But he couldn't, because if he did, his father might strike him again, and he didn't know how hard the blow would be. There was another reason not to cry out. If his father wasn't responsible for this cruel twist of fate, there was only one other to blame.

In a dull voice his father said, “It's all right. I don't expect you to understand, but remember what I said to you this morning.” He turned back to his weaving, and as his hands moved swiftly across the tautly stretched yarn, a change took place. His body relaxed; his face resumed the mild expression it always wore. Soon he whistled softly to himself, and you would not have known, unless you did know, that anything amiss had ever happened.

“My father was content. Do you know how that could be? One of you speak up. How can a man contentedly work the day after his daughter is stolen from him?”

Job was no longer a boy. He was a father himself now, with sons and daughters. The men around him remained quiet. A new baby had arrived. Job held him in his arms while he recounted the tale of Rebekah's disappearance. It was his

custom to do this every time his wife bore him a son. The men had gathered for the circumcision rite, but the priest held the knife back while Job told his story.

The men, who had heard it before, could have answered Job, but they took pleasure in hearing him deliver the moral.

“My father was content because he knew that God would reward the righteous and punish the wicked. My sister was no exception. I pray she survived, but if not, God is lawful, always.”

The men in the dark room with the shutters closed murmured their assent. “God is lawful,” one repeated. Candles burned on the table where the newborn baby had been laid. He kicked his feet randomly, but didn’t cry out. When the priest’s knife touched him, he made a queer sound of surprise and distress. It was more like a small animal’s cry, like a herding dog having its tail docked, than a human cry. The sound was the signal for Job’s wife to rush in, swaddle the baby, whose face had turned bright red, and rush him away to be bathed and bandaged.

The solemn atmosphere turned when they left. The priest was the first to raise a cup of wine, and the men cheered, showering the new father with praise. But no one slapped him on the back. Job was not someone you took familiarities with. After the third cup the men knew without being told that they should leave. When they got home, they would be pestered by their wives. Were the wall hangings silk, the plates gold? How pretty were the servant girls? Don’t tell me Job didn’t look them over first. The rich are a law unto themselves.

One guest was exhausted, having stayed up all night to attend a difficult calving. He might have lost both mother and baby, but as it was, God willed that the calf was stillborn. So the man was angry as well as exhausted, and he could hardly hold his wine at the best of times.

“Your father had no right to strike you,” he said. “I’ve known some sons to run away, or worse.” The drunken guest

pushed his face right up to Job's. The others looked on, startled and embarrassed.

Job regarded him tolerantly. "What would another son have done?"

"Don't ask me. But he wouldn't have cowered. If it was my father, he would have hidden the knives after that."

A sudden passion burned in the drunken guest's face. Without warning he turned and grabbed the priest's knife, which lay on the table waiting to be cleaned and blessed for the next rite.

"Hide your knives!" the drunk shouted. "Because I'm coming!"

As quickly as it came on him the passion faded. The drunken guest blinked and looked around in confusion, as if he had heard his words, but didn't know who had shouted them.

"Pardon," he mumbled. He dropped the knife, which clattered on the stone floor, and ran out without meeting anyone's gaze. Nobody spoke, waiting for Job's reaction. Not one of them owned what he owned, and most had borrowed money from his coffers, which always stood open.

"Is he the only one?" Job murmured quietly.

The men around him shuffled uncomfortably at this baffling question, but Job answered himself.

"You all wonder, and so did I. My sister was gone, and my father chose that very moment to strike me. I was young, but I knew about knives." Job smiled, as if revisiting an old impulse that had not quite died with time. "Even young boys help slaughter spring lambs."

"Your father was your father. He could do what he liked," said a close friend named Eliphaz.

"And that would have been good enough for you, if you were in my place?" asked Job.

“I *was* in your place. When my father was in a rage, he threw it in every direction,” Eliphaz replied. More than a few heads nodded; there was a general murmur of agreement.

“Was your father’s rage a kindness?” Job asked.

Eliphaz hesitated and then smiled. “You’re full of mysteries today.”

“So is the world, and so is God. But this is a mystery I solved,” said Job. He didn’t pause for a reaction. “What do we know about our Lord?” (There was no chance that Job would actually pronounce the name of God, which was forbidden.) “He told us himself. He is a jealous and angry God. Did not Moses receive that teaching? We have the law, so we know how to please God. Even when he is angry, he is just.”

Job had wound himself up and could have delivered a sermon, but suddenly he stopped. He looked blank, like a man lost in thought or hearing voices, you couldn’t tell which.

Quietly he continued, “To a boy, what is his father? God in the flesh. This is righteous. It is the law that fathers rule as God, and my father wanted to protect me. How far could his protection reach? Only as far as his arm. Beyond his fist I would be at the end of the world. I would fall into the same danger that snatched away my sister. The blow my father struck was pure love. I hated him in my heart until God showed me this meaning. Now I only wish I could have returned such love, the kind that is willing to be hated and yet cannot be stopped by hatred.”

Some of his guests murmured at these words, deeply moved. But not all. Another friend, Bildad, was skeptical. “What is your teaching, that God strikes us down out of love? If so, what does he do when he hates us? Surely he condemns the sinners and rewards the righteous.”

Before Job could reply, another friend, Zophar, jumped in. “This was only a child’s lesson. When you were a boy, the world ended with your father’s fist. Now you know better. There is no world out of reach of God’s wrath.”

Job looked at his friends soberly. All three were smiling. To be close to the rich, you must learn subtlety, and the first lesson is a concealing smile. The kind an assassin wears until he draws close enough to strike.

“What do you think of me, my friends, that I have never known suffering?”

“Money is like a feather bed, only softer,” said Bildad, a favorite saying of his.

“This is a day of celebration. Let’s not break our heads arguing over God,” Zophar chimed in.

Job nodded. “There is no point in such arguments. What we know about God, we know. True?”

He bowed his head. Was he praying or being modest or feeling defeated? The room was dim. No one could tell. They were grateful simply to escape. Each departing guest grasped Job’s hand warmly, but he never raised his face. Whatever he might be thinking, the voice in his head had run out of words.

A field hand stood dripping with sweat, holding out two blackened heads of barley. They were blighted, and the first thing Job asked was how far the sticky smut had spread. The field hand shrugged.

“Go ask my friends,” Job said. “Their crops are planted close to mine. Show them what you’ve shown me. It’s probably nothing, but ask if they are worried.”

The field hand retreated with a bow. For some reason the two heads of blighted barley made an image that stuck in Job’s mind. He wasn’t concerned for himself. He owned the richest fields in the valley, and he always had a season’s harvest stored in his granary. His neighbors were not so blessed; they lived from crop to crop. An hour later the field hand rushed back, shaking his head.

“Your friends, their grain is clean,” he said, but he didn’t look like a man delivering good news. He held a bulging sack

close to his belly. With a gesture he let go. Out of the sack spilled a hundred heads of barley, all smutty and withered. They lay at Job's feet like charred caterpillars. His brow furrowed.

“Why didn't you bring this many before?” he asked.

“I brought all there was. This just happened. Whatever this is, it's moving fast.” The field hand backed away a step, as if the grain really was plague-ridden.

Job was a mild man, as his father had been, but he shot the field hand a sharp look and ordered him to keep watch over the barley crop that night. He was to bring any news in the morning. But the blight moved with alarming speed. There was news before nightfall—one of Job's largest fields had turned to blackened stalks. Some invisible fire had killed his crop, and yet it stopped, as if by command, exactly where Job's land met his neighbor's. The people began to mutter. In their minds there was a fine line between ill fortune and being cursed. When the sun rose the next morning, the invisible fire had spread to two other fields, the best that Job farmed. The tips of the grain were charred already. The next field over, owned by his friend Eliphaz, stood untouched. The line between ill fortune and being cursed was crossed.

Job went to his wife, who was being dressed by a servant girl. “Leave off your jewelry, and if you go out, cover your head,” he said. She looked at him, puzzled, and waved the girl away.

When they were alone his wife said, “Why do you ask this? Do you suspect me of something? I'm completely innocent.”

Another husband would have wondered why such a thought leapt into her mind, but he was trusting. “My dear, there's something bad in the fields. God sees everything. If he is angry, let's show that we're not proud.” Pride was the easiest sin for a rich man to fall into; Job had always kept that in mind. He didn't feel that he had sinned, but God looks into the deepest recesses of the heart. Being doubly careful, Job

had even sanctified his sons' houses with offerings, just in case they had harbored evil thoughts.

Later that day Job wrapped himself in sackcloth and appeared at Eliphaz's door.

"You've heard?" he said.

"That your crops are wiped out? Everyone's heard." Eliphaz wore a grim look and invited Job to step over his threshold. Was there a slight hesitancy on his part? Job didn't notice; he was anxious for his friend's advice. He had done everything he could to appease the Lord. He hired priests to light their altars and sacrifice a dozen of Job's newborn animals. He ordered his sons and daughters to follow their father's example and wear rough sackcloth; the women walked to market with a streak of gray ash on their foreheads as a sign of atonement.

Eliphaz disagreed with this gesture. "You're advertising that you've sinned. People will turn on you. I know them."

Job shook his head. "To walk this earth advertises that we have all sinned. What matters is pleasing our Father."

Despite his penance, however, misfortune continued to rain down. Job's flocks took sick and died. Overnight the grain he had stored up in his granary withered away. What could it mean? Behind his back not everyone was entirely grief-stricken. Somehow they found the strength to survive a rich man's downfall. Eliphaz took Bildad aside. What was God saying to them?

Bildad shrugged. "Who am I, Moses? God sent him to Pharaoh to say that Egypt would be visited by ten plagues. I got no message."

Eliphaz twisted his mouth. "Only eight plagues to go."

His morbid joke didn't reach Job's ears. Envy and pity divided the people, but they were all aghast as Job's huge holdings of sheep and camels died. In the space of a month his yoked oxen fell to their knees while plowing and never got up again. A few surmised that demons were responsible, not the

wrath of God, until the calamity of calamities befell. Job gathered his family together at his eldest son's house to pray for an answer. They knelt together, but when the first syllable of their prayer was uttered, the house collapsed around them, and all were killed except Job and his wife. Now pity turned to terror. Plagues had a nasty habit of spreading. Maybe curses did too.

“We are alone and forsaken,” Job's wife wailed.

He didn't reply, but took himself into the desert where he sat naked in the sun, pouring ashes over his head. The next day his closest friends came from the city to console him, although cynics told it differently. Job was no longer rich. With everything gone, he was in fact wretchedly poor. He had become a stranger among the righteous. There was no obligation to a stranger, was there?

The three friends were horrified by what they saw, although it was the terrible smell that reached them first. Overnight Job had become covered in weeping sores. He sat hunched over in the barren desert, scraping ashes and pus from his skin with a shard of pottery from the smashed water jug by his side. If they hadn't been courageous and loyal, his dear friends would have fled such a monstrous sight.

They knelt in a circle around Job, extending their hands (being careful not to touch his skin) and imploring, “Let us take you home. You can't perish out here like this.”

Job said nothing. The sight of sores bursting as he scraped was nauseating. Eliphaz glanced at the other two. Would God punish them if they let Job die alone after seeing his distress?

Suddenly Job spoke. His voice was a croak rising from his parched throat. “I am blameless and upright. If you believe in your hearts that I have sinned, run away. If you stay, you'll defile yourself.”

“We are your friends. What should we believe?” asked Zophar.

“That I walk the path of righteousness.”

“I’m certain of that,” said Bildad, “but forgive me. Isn’t our God a just God?”

Job raised his head and looked at his friend with pain in his eyes. “God brings all things. He brings good and evil.”

Perhaps this made Job’s friends afraid, because they started to weep and tear at their clothes; they threw dust on their heads as if grieving for the dead. They prayed for God to release Job, and yet the next day the friends returned with Job’s wife. She almost fainted when she set eyes on her husband.

“Tell him,” Eliphaz said.

“I can’t weep forever,” Job’s wife said. “Be done with it. Curse God and die.” Job knew where her words came from. She wanted to be free to remarry a man who wasn’t hated by God.

“I should curse you instead, for being so foolish,” Job replied, and his wife departed.

His friends stayed behind, keeping watch. The sun rose and fell over the desert. They put up a tent to protect themselves from the elements and had water brought from the city well. Job sat in the sun, hardly moving. His bones poked out beneath his peeling flesh, but he didn’t die. Only, he started to speak and wouldn’t stop. He cursed the day he was born. He cursed all joy from this world and called upon those who could summon dreadful monsters. He cursed the happy news that a woman would bear a son. His cursing was endless; it frayed his friends’ nerves, and they came out to reason with him.

At that moment he was cursing the stars to return to darkness, but he paused when they approached.

Eliphaz spoke first. “I mean no offense, but your groans pour out like water. Where is the man who taught us so much, whose strength held us up? You should show more patience. A few nights ago I shivered in my sleep, and my hair stood on end. A spirit passed over me and whispered in my ear, ‘Who

can be blameless before God? The Lord doesn't trust even those who are nearest to him. Were not the angels cursed by God when they disobeyed? How much worse are men who plow the earth and sow it with iniquity'."

Job hoarsely whispered, "So what would you have me do, friend?"

"Make your peace with God. He performs all wonders. He brings rain to the fields. He causes sickness, but has a healing hand. Repent and accept your destruction in peace. You will be taken away, at one with the stones of the earth and the beasts of the field," said Eliphaz.

Job's voice rose to a wail. "If only you could see how heavy my calamity weighs. I am rash because the arrows of the Almighty are in me. But believe me, I would rejoice in endless pain if only God would release me. I'm not made of stone or bronze. Don't counsel patience. My strength is gone. I cry out like a wounded animal."

He turned a burning gaze on Eliphaz. "Hear me. A friend who withholds kindness has betrayed God."

But I'm not the one he cursed, am I? Eliphaz thought to himself, keeping quiet. The others were shocked, and they became restless.

Job held them with his accusing eyes. "Can one of you tell me where I've sinned? Have I spoken anything but the truth?"

When he was rich, Job had never been embarrassed to fall to his knees in the middle of the marketplace to pray. He looked up at the sky now.

"God, watcher of men. What have I done to you? Why do you take such care of your children and yet make the night so long and dark? Without you a man will not awake with the dawn. Show me my sin."

Bildad spoke up, more impudently than the first friend. "This wind from your mouth, how long is it going to blow? God doesn't pervert justice. You said so, more often than anyone wants to count. Now you forget everything our fathers

taught us. If you are upright and righteous, as we took you to be, your days will end in greatness. I see it now. Your mouth will be filled with laughter; your enemies will walk in shame. That's what you'd tell me if I were in your place."

These stinging words had their effect. Job's reply was muted. "Do you think I'm at war with God's judgment? He is wise; he knows all. If I argued against him, I might make one point when he makes a thousand."

Just as bitterly as he had cursed creation, Job lifted his face to praise it. "God moves mountains when no one sees it. He spreads out the heavens and makes the earth tremble. When he commands the sun, it must obey. He can hide the stars from sight and trample the waves of the sea. He performs marvels without number; he does great things beyond understanding." A pause. "God brings calamity to everyone. He destroys the blameless and the sinner alike. Is he mocking us? I am blameless, but I don't ask for myself. I loathe my life. I only want to understand this one thing."

"Then let me help you," said Zophar, the last friend. "You babble on as if words can save you. You say that you're pure and clean in God's eyes. But look at you. You writhe in filth. So you beseech God to tell you his innermost secrets, to open up the truth about your calamities. It's ridiculous. You can't fathom his wisdom, which is without limits. He passes by and knows the worthless man."

A smile came to Zophar's lips. "I don't care if you cringe at my words. I said I could help you. Put away your iniquity, however deep it is hidden. Stretch your hands out to God. Once he touches you, you will forget your misery. It will vanish like water dried up by the sun."

Job's reply was even more bitter than before. "In someone who enjoys his ease there is contempt for the misfortune of another. I see that I'm a laughingstock to my friends. But I'm not beneath you. Robbers sleep soundly at night in their caves, even as they provoke God. He turns judges into fools. He makes nations great and then smashes them into dust. How

have you helped me understand any of this? Birds and beasts are born with the wisdom you think you are teaching. All creatures know that God made them and has power over them. My eye has seen all this, and I understand, better than you three. Man who is born of woman is given only a few days, and they are full of trouble.”

To which Eliphaz replied coolly, “If you understand so much, then you already know why you are lost to the Lord.”

“Don’t ask us,” added Bildad.

Or drag us down with you, thought Zophar, but he didn’t speak, since he was the most superstitious and feared that Job might, somehow, rise again.

The group around Job thought that they were alone, but a voice behind them said, “You are all wrong.”

Heads turned. No one had noticed an insignificant boy, brought along to carry the water jugs. During their discussion he had sat cross-legged a few yards away, waiting in case one of the friends signaled that he was thirsty. The boy, who was no more than sixteen, stood up.

“I’m young, and out of respect I would never speak up,” he said.

“Then hold your tongue,” Eliphaz snapped. “Who are you?”

“My name is Elihu, and I have no right to interfere. I know that you will send me to be whipped when we get home. But the Lord can speak through dumb animals, can’t he?”

“Apparently,” snapped Zophar.

Elihu ignored him. “He speaks through anyone who is touched by the spirit. So I bow to all of you, but I say you are wrong.”

The youth gestured at Job’s friends. “First, you three. You are wrong because you blame Job, and yet when he challenged you to find fault with him, you couldn’t. That didn’t stop you

from judging him anyway. You see sin in his heart but none in your own, which makes you hypocrites.”

The friends would have drawn their weapons and leapt upon the boy, but his voice sounded eerie, as if it didn't belong to him. They didn't want to stab him and release a demon, not when they were alone and defenseless in the desert.

Elihu turned to Job. “And you, you protest that you are blameless. You have obeyed the law and made burnt offerings to cleanse yourself and your sons. But even a blameless man doesn't dare to question God. The Lord has no need to justify his ways to men. He created us; we are his. The Lord's gaze extends to the end of eternity. He sees into you as you cannot see into yourself. In your arrogance you would hold God to your petty conception of good and evil, as if he is bound by his own laws. Yet there is only one thing you can know, as he has told us out of his own mouth: ‘I am the Lord thy God.’ There is no answer to that, and no question either.”

Job's friends were shaken, not just by the rebuke they had received, but by the change in Job, who had stopped trembling. His stooped body was beginning to straighten. Tears flowed down his cheeks, and where a tear touched one of his seeping wounds, the pus turned to clear liquid.

While the trance was on Elihu—for it was clear that this simple youth, hardly better than a slave, was filled with the holy spirit—he began to unfold a strange tale. He could see into the next world, and he beheld God hurling into hell the disobedient angels. But even as they fell, God kept close beside him a counsel of evil. This Adversary, or Satan as he was named, spoke only evil, and therefore he had a kind of twisted wisdom about humans. He whispered their misdeeds and sins in God's ear. The transgressions of men were so numerous that the Adversary began to boast that he was the true ruler of the world.

God grew impatient and said, “Go and seek out my servant Job. He is upright and blameless. As long as there is one such as him, you will never prevail.”

Satan gave a knowing smile. “There is no one who is perfectly devoted to you, or they would not have been born of woman,” he said.

Then Satan flew over the face of the earth until he found Job, and just the act of setting eyes on him caused his crops to wither. The Adversary returned to heaven.

“Let me test this Job,” he said.

A kind of wager was struck. God gave Satan a free hand to bring any calamity upon Job and inflict any pain, with one exception. He could not cause Job to die. God said, “The son of man might curse the day he was born, but he will never curse me.”

“And so it befell you,” murmured Elihu. “Your afflictions have been a test, not a sign of wickedness.”

At that instant he blinked twice and looked around in confusion. The holy spirit had left him as suddenly as it had taken him. Job said nothing, but stared straight ahead. His breathing was steady now, and it seemed from his bewildered stare as if he were waking up from a dream. The three friends scrambled to their feet and scattered, resentful and bewildered. As much as they had accused him, one truth was undeniable. In all the words that had poured from Job’s mouth, he had never once cursed God.

“I have not sinned,” he murmured, turning his eyes on Elihu. “I had only forgotten.”

“Forgotten what?” asked the youth, grateful not to be beaten. Returning to himself, he barely knew what he had been saying.

“I had forgotten the most important thing. God blesses his people.”

The words were hard to make out, because Job had started to weep uncontrollably. His father had trusted the Lord more than he ever had. Then Job knew that Satan’s greatest power was not that he could inflict evil. His greatest power was to make the sons of God forget who they were.

Afterward Job returned home, taking Elihu as his personal servant, and what had been blighted turned into a miracle. Job's wife bore him more sons and daughters. His gold was restored, his granary filled to overflowing. Yet as he became richer, Job became more reclusive. He rarely left his house, and when he did, he wore a prayer shawl and kept his face to the ground. People began to use him as a kind of walking moral: never question God, or you will be made to answer. Others took the opposite moral: keep faith with God, and he will reward you with glory and splendor.

What no one guessed was that Job had become a seeker. He had once believed in the wisdom passed down from Moses and the fathers. Now he believed in nothing and everything. The Lord had stopped his mouth, the better that he could open his eyes. What did Job see? A mystery. Something that flew before the wind and answered every question with an echo.

Revealing the Vision

In the evolution of God, the beginnings are ancestral. That's not the same as primitive. God is already advanced by the time we encounter Job, because every aspect of life in ancient Israel was centered on God. As long as there are laws, customs, and a shared identity, which are complicated things, God will be just as complicated.

The book of Job dramatizes God's voice with great intensity and high drama. It isn't a story you can read and walk away from. To use a modern phrase, the story is about bad things happening to good people. The virtuous Job suffers on a mythic scale, like Prometheus chained to a rock while an eagle plucks at his innards, but he also suffers in a very human way. The calamities are breathtaking and swift. Job's crops wither. His granaries become infested. His wife despairs as their precious sons die, Job contracts a grotesque disease, and his friends run away from the sight of him. If these afflictions visited a modern person, he would cry out, in the middle of the

night, “Why me?” Job is about the human yearning to know why.

As we suffer alongside Job, we question alongside him. Even the oldest records give evidence that God was doubted. Various answers come from three friends, speaking one after another in ritualistic fashion. One answer: Job, you aren’t as good as you pretend. You may have hidden your sins from the world, but you couldn’t hide them from God, and now he’s punishing you for it. Another answer: Job, you’re good, but you’re too proud. You think you have total control over your life, but now God is showing you that disaster can strike anywhere, anytime. Explaining why we suffer is a thread that runs throughout the Hebrew Bible, and it’s why I couldn’t begin with a prettier story about some loving God who smiles down upon our lives.

Whoever wrote the Hebrew Bible spent precious few pages on Eden. Paradise was lost almost before the paint dried. There is a beautiful passage about God walking in the Garden in the cool of the evening. Later on in the Old Testament love reappears, but it is mainly the love between men and women, as in the luxurious eroticism of the Song of Solomon:

The song of songs, which is Solomon’s.

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth:

for thy love is better than wine.

Because of the savor of thy good ointments

thy name is as ointment poured forth,

therefore do the virgins love thee. (1:1–3)

Almost every culture has stories of beautiful gods that romp through the world as lovers, gleaming youths like Lord Krishna, who is amorous with hundreds of shepherd girls, or the more lascivious Zeus, who seduces in the shape of a bull, a shower of gold, and many other guises. In the West, the story is bleaker and more existential. Affliction and disaster are never far away, nor is God’s harsh judgment.

Job's friends are a mystical three in number, like the three Fates and the three witches in *Macbeth*, because they speak from the unconscious. Or, to use another modern phrase, they speak from the shadow, the dark realm of the psyche where sin and punishment, shame and guilt, fear and vengeance are secreted away. Sometimes the shadow erupts, and then any kind of misery can ensue. The writers of the book of Job, who seem to be various, lived hundreds of years before Christ. The exact time isn't known, although scholars tend to agree that this is one of the latest books, perhaps the very last addition to the Hebrew Bible. Something very modern is going on, however, because life continues to erupt with inexplicable catastrophes, and guilt hovers even when events are external, random, and beyond our control.

The human mind can tolerate anything but meaninglessness, and nowhere in Job's tale, whether we are listening to his perspective ("I'm innocent") or his friends' ("No, you're not"), is affliction ever considered random: "This is about you. Somehow you made these terrible things happen."

Human life is balanced between believing these words and not believing them. If you believe them, you will be driven to uncover what you did that was wrong. A desperate cancer patient who is haunted by the possibility that she "did this to herself" winds up in Job's predicament. In later centuries, as God evolved in human awareness, an escape was offered from the torment of self-accusation. "I did this to myself" or "God must hate me" leads to healing, forgiveness, and proof of God's love.

But no such escape exists for Job. God speaks in adamant, absolute terms: "I am the Lord thy God." Job's virtue counts for nothing if God wills it so. Divine punishment needs no reason. After the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, life was ordained to contain suffering. The Hebrew Bible ends with the same fatalism with which it begins. In Genesis 3:14 Yahweh says:

Cursed are you above all livestock

and all wild animals!
You will crawl on your belly
and you will eat dust
all the days of your life.

Such a God wants to be feared. We deserve no better, and for the rest of the Old Testament the mixture of good and evil in human life is thoroughly examined, leaving out nothing: murder, rape, incest, greed, pillage, lust, jealousy, the corruption of power. Ever and always, life is perilously close to falling apart. To keep the shadow in check, law enters the picture; rules organize every moment of existence, not just with Ten Commandments, but through the hundreds of daily duties outlined in Leviticus. Virtue was a necessity if you wanted to keep a wrathful God at bay.

Until the book of Job. It dares to question this entire setup by veering into the unthinkable: virtue is no protection at all. The tale is framed by a wager between God and the Devil, in which the Devil boasts that he can lead any man into renouncing God, and God accepts the wager by offering up the most virtuous person on earth. In and of itself, this cruel game is enough to destroy faith. Why would anyone pray to a God who offers no protection, but instead throws you to the Devil on a whim? At the very least Satan is made God's equal, since he has more than even odds that Job will fail. Which means that religion itself would fail, and thus the covenant between God and humankind—a contract guaranteeing that virtue is rewarded—would be rendered null and void.

Hindsight tells us this daring step was necessary. For God to evolve, he couldn't remain a punishing force to be continually feared, just as the psyche couldn't be a sinkhole of remorseless guilt. The book of Job breaks the eggs before the omelet can be made, because it turns obedience on its head. Job obeyed all of God's laws, yet his life blows up as if a bomb went off underneath it.

At a subtler level, Job's story explores how the good things in life might be connected to the bad things. One of the most profound truths in the world's spiritual traditions holds that the good in life cannot be meaningful unless the bad is also. Both teach us who we are, and with complete knowledge we can transcend the temptations of good and evil. The temptation of good is also known as the path of pleasure. That is, a person tries to seek as much pleasure as possible, since pleasure is good, while avoiding life's pain, which is bad.

The path of pleasure comes naturally, and yet the Old Testament is rife with disapproval of pleasure. Its excesses lead to the corruptions of Sodom and Gomorrah, the cities of the plain that were such dens of iniquity that God wiped them off the face of the earth. King David is the closest we come in the Bible to a hero, a poet, and an Adonis too, but he was fatally corrupted by pleasure, sending Bathsheba's husband to death on the battlefield so that he could enjoy her.

Dire warnings against the seduction of worldly pleasure are still with us, of course, but they don't amount to wisdom. The spiritual argument against the path of pleasure is blunt and unswerving: life can never be total pleasure. Pain is always mixed in, and if you want to solve the negative aspects of life—everything that is shoved away to fester in the darkness of the shadow—you must go beyond pleasure also.

Job's story doesn't enter that territory, however. It focuses on the temptations of Satan, who wants us to give in and let the worst side of human nature run free. In Hebrew the name Satan means "the Adversary," and in Job's story the arguments mounted against virtue are adversarial. Being good gets you nowhere. Whatever you are rewarded with can be snatched away in the blink of an eye. You can try being good to please God, but he couldn't care less. The world's wisdom traditions encompass the temptations of both good and evil in order to answer the Adversary. And the answer is that adversaries no longer exist when good stops warring against evil. The essence of God is eternal peace.

Here I am looking down the road. The theme of self-awareness, which is a connecting thread in the evolution of God, begins darkly, but lets in more light as time passes. The experience of bliss can be the purest one of all and therefore the closest to God. God hasn't evolved this far in the book of Job. He is recognizably a tough customer, watching and judging us all the time, prone to fickle whims and answerable to nobody except himself. At the very end an innocent youth named Elihu suddenly appears to resolve the argument between Job and his three friends. We reach a very unconvincing denouement. Having posed questions that threaten to sever the bond between the human and the divine, the story cuts off the debate with pat answers. The three friends are nailed for being hypocrites. Job is nailed for pride, as if God has to answer to him.

Elihu is basically returning the whole situation to square one: God does what God does, period. The framing device returns, as God speaks in his own voice to reassure us that Job passed the test. His virtue regains its rich rewards, with a bonus to compensate for all the trouble he went through. Satan is routed; the status quo is justified once more. In an age of faith, when the ultimate goal was always to make God right, no matter how horrible his behavior, this ending would have been more satisfying. To the child in all of us, there is a fairy-tale quality about it, a reassurance that good always prevails in the end just before we are tucked under our warm blankets to go to sleep.

From a modern perspective, it's much easier to skip the pat ending and read the book of Job for its existential realism. In doing that, we turn the writers' original intent on its head. Instead of being about God's authority, the story teaches us that suffering is both random and universal. Chaos nibbles at the edges of everyday existence. The shadow can erupt at any moment, bringing untold misery. More devastating than all of this, God is dismantled through doubt. Who can worship a deity of caprice? He's the same as chaos and randomness, but wearing a human mask as our eternal Father.

In reply, I would say, “There’s more to come. We’re not at the end yet.” Still, a willful, punishing deity hasn’t disappeared; every kind of God survives somewhere, taking root in our psyche. Religious fundamentalism, whether Christian, Islamic, or Hindu, depends on the same archaic elements, in which fear and sin dominate. But infinity cannot be circled and fenced in. Countless forms of the divine pour forth, and always will. Beyond the wrath of Yahweh, humans keep delving deeper to find the essence of love and to heal fear, which requires the clarity of self-knowledge.

There is a positive lesson in the book of Job, a reason to move forward. God challenges Job by saying, “Where were you when I created the world?” He is calling for surrender, and surrender is necessary on the path. The sin of pride is about the ego thinking that it has all the answers. Job learns that God is not answerable. God isn’t a puzzle that can be cleverly figured out or a supersize human being sitting on a throne in the sky. Where God is, the ego cannot be. Everything that Job loses—wealth, social status, possessions, and a secure family—are irrelevant to the soul’s journey. They are not wrong or bad, as we see when God restores them. By the end, Job sees that he is connected to God in a pure way, without having to gain or lose.

A long road unfolds beyond Job’s story. He is a station along the way, and every station must be experienced before the traveler can move on. Otherwise, we are fated to repeat Job’s predicament rather than solve it.

2

Socrates

“Know Thyself”

“What if I killed a man, Socrates, right now? Just supposing.”

“Even a barbarian like you has limits.”

“You think I’m joking. But what would happen to me? Look around us. Nobody’s watching.”

Two Athenians stood on the brow of a stony hill. Or should we call it a stone hill, because there were ten rocks for every stunted scrap of vegetation? The taller man, Alcibiades, was lean and restless. He shaded his eyes from the withering noon glare.

The shorter one, Socrates, crouched on his haunches to rest his legs. “You’ve made a mistake. Someone is always watching.”

“Who, the gods? That’s a joke.”

“I do what I can to amuse you,” said Socrates mildly.

“No one as ugly as you could be amusing.” Alcibiades licked his dry lips and took a swig from a waterskin. “I’m not being callous. You always taught me to tell the truth, didn’t you?”

The trek from Athens into the hills had been long. The two set out at dawn, but so far they had bagged only a rabbit, which Alcibiades had shot with his sling. He carried the flea-bitten desert rabbit in a bag flung over his shoulder. Socrates waved his hand when the waterskin was passed to him.

“I worry about you,” he muttered.

Socrates had a gnarled, sun-baked body with a flat, snub-nosed face, like that of a satyr painted on the side of a vase. He

was much older than his lean, tall friend, who could have been his son. “Do you know why?” he asked.

“Why what?”

“I worry about you.”

Alcibiades wasn't listening. Down below, a trail wended its way through a narrow ravine. The dirt track barely squeezed between high walls of nubbly limestone worn into a cleft by an ancient stream that once flowed there. It didn't flow anymore. Phoebus Apollo had drunk it dry, or if you traffic in impiety, the sun had dried it up. When travelers wanted to pass through the cleft, their shoulders touched the walls on either side.

Alcibiades became animated. “If I was a bandit, that's where I'd hide. The perfect ambush.” He pointed to a narrow ledge where two men could lie in wait. It was visible from above, but hidden from the sight of unsuspecting traders and farmers going to market down below.

“You *are* a bandit,” said Socrates. “A proven stealer of hearts. You're ruthless.”

Alcibiades smirked. “I have a right to my spoils. I'm a soldier for the state. Anyway, you've never given your heart to anyone, much less had it stolen. You pretend to love, but it's just a game.”

“You play at your own game,” said Socrates. “You act like you're immortal, and that game is fatal.”

They bantered easily and quietly, in such a way that you knew after a while they couldn't be father and son. The younger one was too casual in his insolence, the older one too fond in his gruffness, the way that even a lenient father wouldn't be. Neither one had had a lenient father when they were boys, which may explain why they drew together. That or something more mysterious and probably unsavory. Malicious tongues in the city voiced their opinion on that score, but we will get to lechery later.

Suddenly Alcibiades took a running start down the hill, as if he had spotted some prey. “Forget all that. Follow me,” he shouted.

The two men scrambled down the slope, heading for the narrow ledge. Alcibiades couldn’t be argued out of it or distracted by banter. His blood was up. They would crouch in their hiding place as long as it took before a victim passed beneath them. Then Alcibiades would pounce. At that moment and only then would Socrates know if his companion was in a sporting mood or meant to do violence.

The going was steep and slippery. Dry twigs and scree scattered under their sandals. Their faces were matted with dust and sweat. Alcibiades, a trained runner, didn’t look back to see if Socrates needed help. Wasn’t the old man famous for his toughness? In his soldiering days, during the battle at Potidaea in the north, Socrates stood guard on a cold midnight wearing only a light cloak, yet without a shiver. He was already almost forty. On campaigns where every free male was expected to carry a shield, it was reported that he could stand in place all night, never once stamping his feet or rubbing his arms against the chill. Rabbits mistook him for a tree and nibbled the grass around his feet.

When he was younger and even more impudent, Alcibiades had asked him his secret. “Do you have thicker skin than the rest of us? Like a boar’s hide?”

“I didn’t move because I was thinking,” Socrates replied.

“I think too,” laughed the youth. “I think I’d be smart enough to keep warm.”

“So I’m told. You mostly keep warm under a blanket with a girl whose name you only learn in the morning.”

Which was true. Athens was filled at night with the shrill sound of the *aulos*, the twin pipes that wandering girls played as they went through the streets, signaling that they were available. Alcibiades was known to open his father’s doors

and let an *aulos* girl come in from the cold. Socrates, who was notoriously virtuous, regarded this behavior tolerantly.

He had fallen in the habit of fondness early on. People whispered about the old man and the headstrong boy, but Alcibiades was proud to be the prize that every glance ran after. At banquets the guests lay on couches that held three bodies side by side. Alcibiades mocked Socrates for always being in the middle, with the handsomest youths on his left and right.

“How can you blame me?” Socrates would protest mildly. “Isn’t one of them pushed off the couch when you appear? Usually stinking drunk.”

To have the gift of beauty is like being absurdly rich. You can afford to be careless about how you affect others. Alcibiades was careless about those who loved him. He was careless in most things, actually, and reckless in the rest. The one exception, the thing he took seriously, was the army. When his choleric father beat him with a stick, the boy bent his back, covering his head to protect himself. He told himself that it was good training if he was ever captured someday and tortured by Spartans. *Hate, but keep silent.* At fifteen, he already knew how.

When they got to the shady ledge a veil of coolness fell over them. The narrow waist of the ravine was just below them; the place was silent except for nesting wrens who fussed at the two intruders. A brown mother wren circled their heads, her wings clipping the air in sharp, swift bursts.

“Feel,” said Socrates, who was the first to crouch down.

Alcibiades touched the loose dirt around his feet. “It’s damp.” He pointed to whitened streaks on the rock face behind them where water trickled silently in a pale glistening ribbon.

Socrates shook his head. “Someone’s been here first.” His voice had turned sober.

“How do you know?” Alcibiades felt his ankle being grabbed by Socrates’s darting hand.

“Don’t move. You’ll crush it,” whispered Socrates.

Did he mean a snake? Prized for healing, small snakes sought the cool at noon, especially in this place dripping with water. Socrates loosened his grip. It was taking a moment for the younger man’s sight to clear after staring so long into the sun. He glanced around.

“What?”

“This.”

Socrates brushed his fingers over a sprig growing out of a crack in the ledge. A sacred myrtle, its leaves shiny and pale. One touch was enough to release its luscious scent. Alcibiades had been close enough to girls who wore it; myrtle fragrance made you favored by Aphrodite. Alcibiades liked such girls, for more than being sacred.

“You said you could think,” Socrates grumbled, pulling him from his daydream. “Try, now.”

At twenty-five, Alcibiades had grown past the age of being Socrates’s pupil, and there had never been a real school, with a roof and wax writing tablets. But he recognized a schoolmaster’s barked command. Looking closer, however, he saw nothing out of the ordinary.

Socrates was disappointed, but he didn’t say so. Love made him foolish. He would be stung if Alcibiades grew cross with him, seriously angry rather than playing at it, and nothing riled the handsome soldier more than wounded vanity. In a level voice Socrates explained. “Myrtle can’t grow in the shade. It would wither and die. Someone has made it grow in the dark.”

“How?”

“Magic. How else?”

Alcibiades shrugged, and Socrates said, “How else? That’s a serious question. If you don’t believe in magic, how did this sprig grow here? Perhaps the gods wanted it to. If so, they may have left it for us as a sign.”

“What kind of sign?”

“An omen.”

Socrates casually plucked the sprouting myrtle out by the root and tucked it behind his ear. “Your charade is dangerous. Travelers are on the lookout for bandits. The tough ones fight back.”

Alcibiades frowned. Like most soldiers, he kept his courage intact by imagining that he would never be hurt. “I don’t heed omens.”

“Why? Because you’re never afraid? You should be. Life is a walk to the edge of a cliff. Every day we get a step nearer, and what lies over the brink, no one can tell.”

This turn in the conversation was making Alcibiades irritated. He drew his knife and began to sharpen it with scraping swipes against the stone wall. He might as well gut and skin the rabbit while they waited, to make sure it didn’t spoil in the heat.

Socrates went on. “I was taught to read omens. I had the greatest teacher, back when I was so ignorant that I am still ashamed of it. But I don’t speak of her.”

“Her?”

“She was called Diotima, and if the gods didn’t leave this omen, she did.”

Alcibiades couldn’t hide his amazement. “So you think this Diotima knew that I might be hurt today?”

“Or worse. Would you like to read omens? It’s not hard once you learn to see.”

Alcibiades had forgotten the rabbit by now. He squinted his eyes narrowly. “No one can understand you. Half the time you say the opposite of what you know is the truth. You’re tricky, and you’re proud. But you pretend to be ordinary,” he said.

“That’s because I am ordinary. I believe in the gods, like all ordinary people.”

“See? That’s what I mean about saying the opposite of the truth.”

If Alcibiades had forgotten about the ungutted animal in his sack, Socrates hadn’t. He pulled it out. In death the creature looked like a limp gray rag.

“Is this the truth?” said Socrates. “Are we like rabbits? We bleed. We can be struck down. So why not call us animals and kill us for sport?”

“Because we’re human.”

“What does that mean?”

“I’m sure you’ll tell me.”

The peculiar thing about Socrates was that banter always led this way, into deep waters. “What makes us human,” he said, “is that we think about the gods and they think about us. You laugh, but that is what Diotima taught me. The gods are here.”

“Right this minute?”

“Yes.”

“You’re right, you are ordinary,” Alcibiades mocked. “If the gods are here, I want to see Aphrodite’s breasts.”

Socrates ignored his jibe. “What do you see when you look around? The world as it is. Rocks, a narrow trail, a dead rabbit. But such a world is without purpose. Life and death dance with each other, gripped tightly together. Neither is willing to let go, and so the dance never stops. Animals accept this reality. Humans fight against it.”

“Am I allowed to say something?” asked Alcibiades. “Rocks are hard. The trail is dusty. The rabbit will never feed its tender young again. I’m glad I see the world as it is, not as it should be.”

“So you don’t mind being an animal?” asked Socrates.

“Not if I’m the one that survives.”

Socrates looked grave. “The omen is darker than I told you. If I read it right, it says that you will die violently. Not today, but one day. Your widow will bend her face to the ground with tears, but half of Athens will rejoice that you are gone. “

The contours of the young man’s face sagged. “Why are you saying such horrible things to me? You should spare a friend, the way a doctor spares a patient who doesn’t know he’s dying.”

Socrates gave his young companion a sharp look. “We are all patients who want to be told that we aren’t dying. The truth is different.”

Their talk had been so intense that neither heard the sound of horses’ hooves until it was directly below them. Suddenly the noise caught their attention. Alcibiades’s body tensed. Getting on hands and knees, he peered over the ledge. A rickety wagon was passing beneath, loaded with straw baskets. The air was heavy with the oily smell of olives. The wagon’s driver didn’t look up.

“Here’s your sport. Go ahead, jump,” whispered Socrates in Alcibiades’s ear.

“It’s just a boy.”

“All the better. You’ll probably win.”

Crouching there, they could see that the wagon driver was no more than twelve, a farm boy in a wide-brimmed straw hat. It was all he could do to handle the old mare pulling the wagon, who was spooked by the narrow passage and the ringing of her own hoofbeats. After a moment they were through the waist of the ravine and the noise faded away.

“I restrained myself,” said Alcibiades sourly. “The way you provoked me, I could have done something stupid just then.”

“Really? Do you enjoy deluding yourself?” asked Socrates. “You’ve killed Spartans in battle, and one time you went mad. You let your hatred consume you and hacked off their limbs. In your bloodlust you condemned the enemy to go to the afterlife defiled. Now their shades want revenge.”

“To hell with your omens. I fought for Athens. I killed as an act of honor.” Alcibiades’s temper gave way to worry. “How will I know which shades to appease?” he asked.

“Wait and ask them. They’ll be lined up after you die.”

Alcibiades bit his lip as he shoved his knife back into the sheath he wore at his waist. He looked overhead, squinting. The sun was past the zenith, showing like a brilliant bead against the rim of the rock slope. For today, the game was spoiled. Socrates was already inching upslope, retracing the way they had come. Alcibiades grunted and tossed the dead rabbit into the ravine for spite before following. They arrived back in Athens after sunset. Socrates had started to whistle. Alcibiades remained downcast. It wasn’t dark, but the *aulos* girls were already piping. The shrill sound scraped against his nerves, but it aroused him too. He licked his lips to say something when Socrates interrupted.

“I could never teach you to read omens. You care too much about staying alive. I’m going home.”

On the way back to town Alcibiades had felt his blood subside, but now it sprang up again, the way a dead-looking coal in the ashes, when poked, comes back to life.

“That’s right, go home. You probably still have enough teeth to eat your dinner.” There was a mirror in his mind, in which Alcibiades could see how ridiculous the squat old man looked beside his own dazzling Apollo-like figure. “Terrify me and then run away,” he muttered under his breath.

Socrates peered over his shoulder. “Forget today. I will come back to you when you’re calm,” he said as the shadows swallowed him up.

The next morning Socrates wandered through the agora, the town marketplace, pinching an apple at one stall, sniffing the freshly slaughtered lamb hanging at another. He would talk to anyone, rich or poor. Nobody could predict what would come out of his mouth, but a band of youths were in the habit of following him, including Alcibiades, the wildest of them. They were eager to see whose unwary ego he would puncture. If Socrates ran into somebody of importance, that person did well to turn his back. It was dangerous even to say hello. Limping away from an argument, which always began as an innocent conversation, his opponents smarted. They had been bitten by words like horseflies that could make the skin bleed.

But none of them knew who Socrates really was. He often felt that he himself barely knew. He was forever watching himself from the inside, whereas everyone else only saw him from the outside, a strangely cheerful, curious, squat, penniless, henpecked curiosity. Some called this curiosity harmless, but others kept a sharper eye out and considered him a threat.

“You are a teacher of misery,” said Antiphon, a rival teacher, a few months ago, publicly accusing Socrates. “You set yourself up as wise, but look at you. You don’t work. God knows how you get any food. You wear the same cloak summer and winter. I’ve never seen you in a new pair of sandals or a decent tunic.”

Antiphon had cornered Socrates near a temple on the Acropolis, speaking in a loud voice to attract attention. A small crowd of townsfolk lingered, wondering how Socrates would reply.

“Go on, Antiphon,” murmured Socrates. “You describe me very well. If I can’t be admired, at least I can be noticed, and by someone as esteemed as you.”

“Am I esteemed?” asked Antiphon suspiciously, cutting him off.

“Of course. Ask anyone here. Ask yourself.”

Some bystanders chuckled, but Antiphon refused to be distracted. He said, "Where does your mockery lead, but to more misery? Your pupils have learned to sneer at convention. They are lazy and impudent, and because they imitate their teacher, they will turn out just like you, mired in poverty. Do you deny that money makes life easier? It is far better than starving. In the end your followers will wake up to their miserable existence, but by then it will be too late."

"Well argued," said Socrates, who never raised his voice. "But unfortunately, you have proved the opposite of the case you were trying to make. I would show you, but since you claim to teach wisdom, I would be like a cobbler stealing a shoe from another cobbler. With one shoe each, neither of us would profit."

The tips of Antiphon's ears turned scarlet. He was one of a new class of wandering teachers known as Sophists, who did claim to teach wisdom, as Socrates said. Athens was divided about believing this claim.

"Not a cobbler, Socrates. You're more like a crab," Antiphon snapped. "A crab scuttles sideways to escape, just as you're trying to do now."

Socrates shrugged. "I only wanted to protect your reputation, dear Antiphon, but you are that strange thing, a defendant in court who insists upon being found guilty after the jury has just pronounced him innocent."

"Show me my guilt," said the Sophist aggressively.

Socrates paused a moment. "First, you are guilty of bad faith. You have no interest in what I teach. You've accosted me to make a public spectacle, in the hope that you can attract some of my pupils to yourself after they see me humiliated.

"Second, you are guilty of false reasoning. It's true that I am poor, that my food is meager, and I wear the same cloak every season. But I am happy, or at least that is what everyone tells me. Where does my happiness come from? Not from pleasure, because by your own accusation I lack the money by

which men run after pleasure. Therefore, my pupils will see that money has nothing to do with happiness. So which example should they follow? Yours, which dwells on superficialities, or mine, which may lead them to the secret source of the truth?"

Antiphon abruptly turned on his heels, followed by the crowd's jeers. That was a typical encounter, of the kind that sharply divided Athens between champions of Socrates and those who wished him harm. But on this particular day he came very early to the agora and talked to no one. He was troubled by what had happened with Alcibiades. Like a cat to milk, the handsome soldier would be back, but it would turn out the same way it always did. He would be ashamed for his wildness and his lack of self-control. He would even shed tears. Yet within a few days he would go back to being Alcibiades.

And the dark omen? Socrates genuinely believed that the gods had caused the myrtle sprig to appear, or else that Diotima had left it there. He put nothing past her. Watching the farmers set up their stalls, Socrates saw her once again as he had first seen her twenty years ago, with a wild tangle of black hair and heavy eyebrows. She wore a ragged shift and no sandals. She looked like a child raised by wolves. Very little about Diotima was becoming, and this had appealed to Socrates, because very little about him was becoming either.

He was a young man working the family trade. "Can you carve me a statue?" asked Diotima, blurting out the words without introducing herself. "Or are you a statue yourself? In which case I apologize for bothering you."

Socrates faced her, covered in white marble dust. He blended in with the stone he cut. "I'm a mason, like my father," he said. "But I carve statues too. What kind do you want?"

"What kind do you make?" she asked.

"Only what you see," replied Socrates, turning away. He was surrounded by small gods and goddesses to be sold in the

shops all around the base of the Acropolis.

“That’s a shame. I wanted the invisible kind,” said Diotima.

“Invisible? They’re the easiest to make. You can do it yourself.”

It was a hot day, and Socrates, bare-chested except for his thick leather mason’s apron, was ready to take a break in the shade. He threw down his chisel and wiped his brow with a rag.

Diotima shook her head. “You’re wrong. Invisible statues are the hardest to make,” she said.

“And why is that?”

Diotima took up a small statue, a crude image of Athena with helmet and shield, turning it in her hand. “The point of all these statues is to show the likeness of divinity,” she said. “Otherwise they would just be ordinary mortals. How can the divine be carved? Divinity is invisible, so any true statue of the gods must also be invisible.”

Socrates didn’t know how to respond. What the wild woman said made sense, and yet it confused him at the same time.

“You look bewildered,” she remarked. “Good. There’s a chance I may outwit your ignorance.”

Socrates had a rough scrap of bread, some salt, and olive oil, which he had brought for his lunch. He sat under a tree and broke the bread, offering to share it with Diotima. Anyone could see that she hadn’t eaten recently.

“Can you teach me to carve a god’s likeness, then?” Socrates asked, not that he took her seriously, but his curiosity was aroused.

“I’m not a carver,” said Diotima. “But I can teach you to see the invisible, and then you can decide on your own what to do.” She looked at him out of deep, knowing eyes. “Beware,

though. Once you see what I have to show you, you'll throw away your chisels and hammers."

Socrates laughed. "Why?"

"Because the outer form of the gods is worthless, once you've viewed their reality." Diotima gave a wry smile. "I really should warn your wife."

"So the wisdom you teach destroys marriages," said Socrates. "Mine is hobbled already. My wife and I are so lame that neither of us can make it out the door to leave." Socrates was a butt of jokes for marrying Xanthippe, a notorious shrew.

Diotima said, "Ah, you are clever, and ugly too. No wonder your wife complains."

Homely as she was, Diotima was a seducer of souls. They returned to the stonemason's site, and as Socrates chipped away, she sat in the shade talking. Her hair never grew tame; she didn't appear to have a change of clothes. At first he felt sorry for her, but it was obvious that he couldn't bring her home. The best he could do was to take two pieces of bread instead of one and tell Xanthippe it must be rats stealing into the larder.

A typical lesson from Diotima minced no words. "You are no more blind and ignorant than other men," she would begin. "You are ruled by appetite. You envy those who get more pleasure than you can get. But there are moments when you catch yourself, and then you are ashamed of your lusts."

"Is that what puts me above my cat, shame? Then it must be better to be a cat, which doesn't have enough imagination to inflict suffering on itself."

Diotima laughed briefly. "Don't try and compete with me. Just listen. Ours is the shame of a rational creature who can look at its own image and wish to be better."

"But drunks wake up with remorse in the morning and skulk back to the taverns when night falls."

So it went between them, the stonemason and the wandering lost woman. Each day Diotima dropped another hint about the mystery that hid behind veils. People eavesdropped on these lessons; people also gossiped. It was said by a neighbor that Xanthippe met Socrates at the door with a heavy stick—or anything that made a handy weapon—gripped in her fist. Yet for all the misery she inflicted, Socrates found himself growing happier, and at unpredictable moments he was strangely ecstatic.

Even so, these moods came and went. He found it hard to let go of his fatalism. “When the gods gave us reason, they forgot to make us perfect. It’s all their fault. A potter chooses to make the best pot he can, because everyone knows that a leaky pot is worthless. But every human has a leaky soul. I’ll rail at Zeus about this when I run into him.”

“Don’t play at blasphemy,” snapped Diotima. “It’s worse than turning into a Sophist, if that’s possible.” This was one of the few times Socrates ever saw her genuinely angry.

She cooled down as quickly as she had flared up, and a new humor overtook her—sorrow. “Most men are condemned, as you can see. But it’s a strange prison that holds them, because each inmate has been handed the key to his cell. We get the key when we’re born, and we could escape anytime we chose.”

“Then why don’t we?”

“Because our jailer is the mind, and a fiercer one never existed. Even if the cell door were flung wide open tomorrow, the prisoner would consider it some kind of trick and remain slumped on the floor of his cell, bemoaning cruel fate.”

Diotima gave a faint smile. After making provocative statements she always fell silent, leaving the mystery hanging in midair. It was part of her seduction, because she knew, as every tease does, to unveil her treasure slowly. She might disappear for a day or two, yet when she returned, her argument picked up at the exact point where it left off.

“Fate is not cruel, however. It seems merciless only when you allow it to catch you, like a shepherd who refuses to run from a wolf and winds up between its jaws. If men weren’t so ignorant, they would see that the gods want only our happiness. That is why humans began to worship in the first place, out of gratitude.”

“Or fear,” Socrates interrupted.

She shook her head. “Fear isn’t worship. Fear arises when you believe that the gods are gone. An absent god can be malicious or vengeful. He could be the hidden reason your crops failed or your house burned down. Anything is possible when humans are no longer connected to the gods.”

Socrates replied, “I could argue the opposite. The gods are amused by our ruin. They watch us murder and go to war, but do nothing to stop us. How can you claim that they want our happiness? Where’s the proof?”

By this point Socrates would be so immersed in conversation with Diotima that his tools were lying useless on the ground. He didn’t notice the glances of passersby, who had already begun to whisper that Socrates was forgetting how to work.

“It can’t be proven that the gods want us to be happy,” said Diotima.

“But you just said—”

She seized his hand to make him stop talking. Her clasp was warm and weathered, like the hand of someone destined never to live under a roof. “Listen closely. The gods are here, walking beside us. Our ancestors saw them. Pallas Athena rode in the same chariot with Achilles at Troy. They were blessed, our ancestors, but we are more blessed. The gods no longer cradle us like nursemaids with a drooling infant. They have freed us, so that we can know ourselves. Without that knowledge, life is meaningless.”

How could anyone not be seduced by such talk? Socrates felt giddy, as if her words were strong wine. Diotima noticed.

“You’re trembling like a baby, but I won’t hold you to my breast. It’s a rather withered breast, as you can see. Take hope. There’s more to say.”

She got up and went away. Only then did Socrates notice how late the hour was. The last light was fading, and he had no new statues to sell. That meant no money to take home, which meant that Xanthippe would be in a foul mood. These things mattered, and yet in some part of him they didn’t amount to anything.

Although at the end of their last meeting Socrates had promised to catch up with Alcibiades when his friend was calmer, he didn’t get the chance. Hotheaded, always running after lovers, after glory or after shame, Alcibiades was rarely calm. But that wasn’t the reason. Socrates didn’t come to Alcibiades, because Alcibiades came to him first. He pounded on the door of his house, which stood in the worst quarter of the city, where the springs had become foul and the women had to trudge a long way to fill their clay jugs. Alcibiades knocked again. He was fearless, but he hoped that Xanthippe wouldn’t answer it, or if she did, he hoped she would not be holding anything she could swing.

Still there was no sound of anyone answering the door. Alcibiades raised his hand to knock again, then thought better of it.

“Did a secret voice tell you not to?”

He whirled around to face Socrates, who had quietly come up behind him. “I have a voice like that. It tells me when I am about to do wrong.” He was dangling the thread of an innocent conversation, but Alcibiades didn’t take the bait.

“There’s a war. You haven’t heard?”

Socrates didn’t reply. He looked away toward the sea, even though the sea was out of sight.

“I have to sail on the first tide,” said Alcibiades. “But I wanted to ask you. Is this when I die? You said it would be

violent. Will I never see Athens again?”

“How should I know?”

“What about your voice—won’t it tell you?”

Socrates held out his hands like a thief giving proof that he hasn’t snatched gold trinkets from a stall. “It decides when to come, not me.”

Alcibiades stared at the ground, not wanting to show that hope was deserting him.

“Stay home,” said Socrates mildly. “There’s always a reason.”

“I can’t stay. My debts, my women. I just thought that you —” Alcibiades stopped short. “Never mind. I’m not myself. Come, let’s get drunk.”

He pointed toward the closest tavern, but when Socrates didn’t follow, he turned around. “If you love me, old man, allow me an hour. Use your philosophy and make me forget this damned war.”

“All right, but we have to go where I want to.”

Alcibiades nodded. Socrates led the way uphill, toward the Acropolis. They walked in silence, sharing the same thought. They both knew the real reason why Alcibiades loved Socrates. The gossip about lechery was wrong, yet a pact of love was sealed between them. There had been a day, seven years before, when Alcibiades burned to prove himself a warrior. He was an aristocrat, which bought him an officer’s cloak.

The fighting in this battle broke out near the city of Potidaea, one of a string of battles that had no end in sight. The delusion of empire inflamed Athens, and the price was constant war with rebel cities. No longer a beardless youth, Alcibiades had reached his full height; he was strong enough to stand in front of a phalanx of hoplites, citizen-soldiers armed with spear and shield.

That day morale ran high. Athens was thirsty for victory, and the enemy had been starved by a long blockade from the coast. But Alcibiades couldn't stand to wait, and when he saw the first sign of the enemy, mere specks on a clear horizon, he broke ranks and ran at them furiously, not looking to see how many of his men followed. No one followed. The lowest plebe knew how green he was.

Ignoring this, Alcibiades closed fast on the enemy, and if he sensed that he was alone, he didn't flinch. *Hate, but keep silent.* When he was close enough, he cocked his arm and flung his spear at a startled foot soldier among the enemy, who couldn't believe that a lone officer was dashing toward him across open ground. The spear soared and came to earth, hitting the ground twenty feet short. It quivered as it stuck in the dirt. The enemy soldier was almost amused.

"Take your spear back home," he shouted. "Your father wants to teach you to shave."

Alcibiades could have retreated with honor after this futile gesture, but instead he drew a short sword and swung it around his head, shouting for blood as he charged.

There were two of the enemy in front of him, but they weren't armed to fight. They were advance scouts sent to count the number of Athenians arrayed over the hill. Both drew their small knives, looking at each other nervously. A madman was charging at them, but at least they outnumbered him, and the first clash of weapons would draw some of their comrades, who were crouching over the rise behind them.

A scrawny copse of trees stood to the left, and all at once a man strode out of it, an older Athenian. The enemy scouts stopped in their tracks, startled, and Alcibiades, who wasn't as crazed as he acted, slowed down.

"Go back," the older Athenian said gruffly. His voice was low and steady. The enemy hesitated. It wasn't clear who the intruder was addressing.

The older Athenian brandished his sword. “I am the only one here who has fought hand to hand. This youth”—he nodded at Alcibiades—“thinks that blood is a medicine for fear. It isn’t. So take my advice. Return to your ranks.” He looked directly at the enemy scouts, who, when seen up close, were no older than Alcibiades. “Tell your comrades you’re lucky to be alive. You met one Athenian who isn’t afraid to die and another who wishes he wasn’t.”

Something in the man’s presence convinced them. The two scouts saluted with a bow, as if they had just had a conversation about crops or women, and retreated without shouting for support.

The whole thing had the potential for comedy, but Alcibiades was trembling with rage.

“You had no right!” he shouted.

“To save you? I apologize,” said Socrates. “I fight for life. In your eyes that must be a crime.”

“Cowardice is a crime. That much I know.” Alcibiades gestured over his shoulder. “My men are watching. What will they say?”

Socrates began to walk back toward the Athenian line. “It won’t matter. They were never your men.” He turned and gazed at Alcibiades. “Do something to make them yours. That’s what I just did.”

This pact is what made Alcibiades his. The battle went to Athens that day, and Alcibiades proved himself a reckless killer. The troops cheered. And why not? They had witnessed the ridiculous valor of Alcibiades. Instead of laughing, it was better to respect him. During the victory celebrations, Socrates pulled Alcibiades aside before he was too drunk to listen.

He said, “You owe me nothing, except to think about this day. You’ve tried to become an animal, and for that you will be called great. But I am ashamed of you.”

Now, as they reached the top of the Acropolis, Socrates found a block of rough-hewn marble to sit on. He liked being

reminded of his old profession.

“It doesn’t matter if you march off and die in battle,” he said. Alcibiades could have protested that it mattered to him, but he didn’t. He was gloomy enough to seize any consolation. Socrates went on.

“War doesn’t simply break out today or tomorrow. Being divided, humans are constantly at war inside. Even the most contented and calm-looking are pretending, or else they are deluding themselves. Fear and anger, hopelessness and despair are the enemies in the mind. What is to be done? This war inside is a sickness. The cure is obvious even though few seek it. End the division that creates joy one day and sorrow the next.”

If this was a tactic to calm Alcibiades down, it worked. He fell into a musing mood.

“Maybe we were created to be at war,” he said. “Death is my fate. If you can’t live with dying, you are not really living.” Like many people who ask for comfort, he argued to defend his own misery.

Socrates replied, “You are saying that you cannot cure yourself, any more than a man who has passed out with fever can prescribe his own medicine. But that’s not the reality.”

Against his will, Alcibiades heard bones crunch, the sickening sound when a sword penetrates the enemy’s chest. “Don’t tell me that suffering isn’t real. You can trick me with words, but not about that.”

Socrates shook his head. “Reality doesn’t trick anyone. Illusion does nothing else.” He paused. “We may never meet again, and you are afraid.”

“It doesn’t help to tell me,” growled Alcibiades.

“We may never meet again,” Socrates repeated, “so listen. I have seen who you really are, as no one else in the world has. Who you really are is shy, like a maiden afraid to leave her father’s house. I can’t show her to you directly. She can only

be glimpsed with a sideward glance. Unless you are fortunate, she will evade you your entire life.”

He regarded his young friend. “I will never lose you even if you lose yourself. You plaster a layer of pleasure over your pain, the same way a lazy builder thinly covers a wall to hide that it’s cracked and ready to fall down.”

Alcibiades moaned. “Stop, just this once.” He turned to go. “Now, of all moments,” he murmured resentfully.

The Sophists weren’t entirely wrong about how Socrates’s students had become infected.

Socrates rose from the marble block with a shrug. “Let’s go pray. All this banter has made me forget the gods. One must never do that. Forgetting is very dangerous.”

“You go. I won’t pray to our fickle gods. Sacrifice a grain of wheat or an ox, it doesn’t matter. They still let us die like flies on a sticky honeycomb,” grumbled Alcibiades.

Socrates pointed to a dozen temples on the rocky brow of the Acropolis. “I once thought the gods lived there, which is as futile as your thinking that they don’t. To be divine, a god must be everywhere. Which means that the gods are here, right beside us. When you know that, they will never desert you.”

“How did you learn all this?” asked Alcibiades. It was hard to tell whether he was humbled or just resigned. His debts, his women. He had no choice but to go to war, where Socrates didn’t matter a fig.

“What I tell you comes from my lips, but not from me,” replied Socrates quietly. “I say what my *daemon* would have me say.” This was Socrates’s name for his inner voice.

“So you are possessed,” said Alcibiades wryly.

“Yes, like the madwoman who misled me.”

They didn’t linger long on the holy mount. Alcibiades embraced his teacher and whispered in his ear, “Don’t hate me. You’ve shown me the image of wisdom. I would rather die than forget it.”

They both knew he only half meant it. Alcibiades galloped down the hill, not looking back at Socrates or the Acropolis. A soldier knows what to do the night before he sails. Debauchery can be as good as philosophy. Not everyone is blessed to be ugly and a nobody.

Much evil news would follow, but Socrates ignored it. As tenderly as he loved Alcibiades, he loved the mystery more. He continued to try and outwit ignorance with words. It was the only way to give a glimpse, in a fleeting second, of the divine.

Everyone knows how Athens repaid Socrates. He was tried on a charge of promoting false gods and corrupting the city's youth. Five hundred jurors sat for the trial, and the verdict was "guilty" by four or five votes. After his sentence was handed down, the condemned man sat up all night with a cup of hemlock by his side, chatting cheerfully with his friends, even though death was at his elbow. They wept. They begged him to escape; a boat was ready for him in the harbor. But Socrates was completely indifferent. It was as if he wasn't going to die, or never could. Once he drank the poison cup, he was ready to solve the last riddle.

What about glamorous Alcibiades? The peculiar thing about omens is that they never do any good, but they never wear off either. Alcibiades threw himself into everything. He spoke at the assembly, and listeners compared his silver tongue to that of Pericles. He led military expeditions and killed more Spartans, and when an expedition to Sicily turned into a fiasco, he took a ship by dead of night and joined the Spartans. He tried the same double game with the Persians, and whether it was beauty, courage, recklessness, or cunning that kept him alive, Alcibiades proved something. Omens can be beaten. Doom loses to the fastest runner.

Until the day it happened. He stayed among the Persians, who were masters of luxury beyond anything dreamed of in Greece. One afternoon Alcibiades strolled out of his house to walk off a hangover; even with his temples throbbing, he could hardly remember the air smelling sweeter. He closed his

eyes to inhale more deeply and thus missed his attackers. They sprang on him with knives, and five minutes later he was a corpse from which flowed a surprising amount of blood. The dry ground thirstily drank it up. When his body was returned to Athens for burial, the widow of Alcibiades followed it in long veils with her face to the ground, hardly able to see her feet for the tears in her eyes, while half of Athens rejoiced that he was gone.

Revealing the Vision

Ancient Greece seems irrelevant, with its many gods and goddesses, if you accept that monotheism stands for progress. Socrates lived at least five hundred years after the book of Job was written. From a Judeo-Christian perspective, anything that he has to say reveals much about philosophy, but almost nothing about religion.

But no one could be more relevant than Socrates if you change the lens. If God is about our own awareness, then “Know thyself” has huge religious implications. In Athens during the life of Socrates, despotism was a constant threat, and since despots tend to be reactionaries, religion was used to keep people in line. Obedience, superstition, and fear are powerful political tools. In that regard, we are the children of Socrates, but also of his enemies. This sounds impossible, since it’s like sympathizing with the executioner *and* his victim. But consider what each side stood for.

When they condemned Socrates to death, the reactionary forces in Athens wanted to defend the gods and keep young people from being corrupted—in this case, “corruption” is a code word for having opinions that challenge the status quo. Socrates stood for the opposite, questioning all received opinions and authority (hence the label that most people remember when they think about Socrates, a gadfly).

What remains so astonishing about the trial of Socrates, nearly twenty-five hundred years later, is that anyone cared. When was the last time a philosopher endangered the public

welfare? Or when the definition of truth was a matter of life and death? Reading the dialogues set down by Plato, in which Socrates is always the best, wisest thinker and the most fascinating character, nobody sits on the sidelines. Soldiers, gadabouts, solid citizens, professional philosophers, and privileged youth all have their say about truth. A special case is the charismatic, but treacherous Alcibiades; we'll get to him later.

It doesn't matter whether Socrates spoke of God or the gods. He was interested in the divine. Why? Because he believed that creation had a divine origin, and therefore so did humans. But there was a journey to take before a person could experience this truth personally. If you think of Socrates as only the brave martyr who drank a cup of hemlock, you are missing the big questions we cannot escape: Who am I? What is the purpose of life? Is there supreme truth? To these questions Socrates gave answers that mystify people, then and now, because "Know thyself" is shortchanged, turning into mild advice from a psychologist rather than a life-and-death command to transform ourselves. Socrates didn't mean know that you have a hot temper, like to eat too much, or want to get ahead in the world. The "self" in "Know thyself" was not the everyday ego personality with its hopes, fears, drives, and desires. Socrates refused to neatly define the self he had in mind, just as Buddha refused to use a word like "God."

Their reasons were the same: it defeats truth to use words, since words imply that you know what you are looking for. Instead, truth is an experience. It cannot be anticipated, any more than one can anticipate, at age five, what it will feel like to go to college, get married, and have children. Experience is fresh and new (or should be); thus truth is fresh and new. From there, it's a small step to demanding that God be fresh and new. More than anything else, such an open-ended approach to the truth showed Socrates the way to his trial and execution.

The authorities were right to be afraid of him. As a teacher, Socrates taught his pupils to question everything, but that by itself wasn't treasonous. Intellectual freedom, as we would

dub it, was a small part of the Socratic method. To grasp how truly dangerous Socrates was, you have to go back to Diotima and a revolution in the unfolding of God (in translation, we find Socrates speaking of God and the gods fairly equally). Every society co-opts God to bolster the status quo. Good people go to church (or make sacrifices at the temple of Athena), obey the rules, fear divine punishment, worry about the afterlife, feel patriotic, and go to war to defend their country. God supports these activities, and so did the Greek gods.

Diotima, who gets credit from Socrates for being his teacher and much wiser than he, stands for a different perspective, one that is far more radical. She saw the entire world as a mystery, and delving into the mystery meant overturning the very notion of truth. What is true? In Athens during the fifth century BCE, the truth was a set of ideas that could be taught, and the better you mastered these ideas, the wiser you were. A school of teachers known as Sophists (taking their name from *sophia*, the Greek word for “wisdom”) collected the best ideas and passed them on.

It was insulting to them when Socrates exposed their methods as empty and misguided; as a class, the Sophists are portrayed as self-deluded, if not vain, fools. Plato is our source for everything we know about Socrates, essentially, and his low opinion of them serves as a foil for the total integrity of Socrates, who feared nothing, either as a soldier when he fought for Athens or in the face of death, when he refused all offers to help him run away after the court’s guilty verdict.

Socrates was a kind of archseducer. He aimed to make truth so seductive that it overtook the mind, purified it of all false beliefs, and ignited a lifelong hunger for a higher reality. For Socrates, truth and reality were the same. They were like a brilliant light compared to ordinary reality, which was like watching shadows playing on the walls of a cave. If you face one way, you are captivated by the shadow play; if you turn around, you are dazzled by the light.

This position is known as idealism, and we are the children of it, just as we are the children of the practical, hardheaded realism that Socrates was accused of subverting. Ideals, also known as Platonic forms, are the essence of everyday experience. The ideal of beauty is perfect and transcendent; because it exists, we see flowers, children, and our lovers as beautiful. The ideal filters down into the ordinary world, where we see it in diluted form. The same holds for the ideals of truth, justice, and all other higher aspirations. We are seeking the ideal, starting with everyday experience but rising higher and higher—if we are true philosophers, lovers of wisdom—until the pure ideal is revealed. This is the soul journey Socrates outlined.

It's easy to condemn those who put him to death. And yet, being honest with ourselves, we probably want the same thing they defended: a stable society without inflammatory radicals who incite discontent. To many good Athenian citizens, Socrates was a disruptive force. Those who turn over the applecart must die before they become martyrs and heroes; in their lifetime, they are seen as serious troublemakers.

In reality, Socrates worshipped the same gods as every other devout person, and he disapproved of youth run riot. Dissipation wasn't part of his teaching, any more than blasphemy was. Yet in a deeper way Diotima taught blasphemy to her pupil, because "Know thyself" is extremely subversive in the end. To take it seriously means that you will go on a search for God that enters the inner world and places a lower value on the outer world. It means that you will be in the world but not of it, that you will become the light of the world rather than hiding your light under a bushel basket. I can use phrases associated with Jesus because the link to Platonism is quite strong.

In fact, some scholars believe that the Gospel of John in the New Testament was written by someone well versed in Plato's thought and the Greek ideals. The Christian tradition is most people's direct link to Socrates. John's Gospel contains no miracles and no Christmas story. It begins with the most

abstract approach to God in the Bible: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” The word (*logos*, in Greek) took on a deep meaning for early Christians. It described who Jesus was and where he came from. John is quite explicit about this:

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.
(1:14)

But why should Jesus need Socrates and vice versa? One reason is that when Jesus was crucified, his disciples were left behind expecting, quite literally, that the Messiah’s purpose had been to overthrow the Roman Empire, free the Jews from bondage, and reign supreme over the earth. Only then would the Old Testament prophets like Isaiah be justified and fulfilled.

When that didn’t happen, the disciples felt bereft and defeated. John is seen as the rescuer of Jesus’s mission. He says, in simplest form, “The Messiah did what he was supposed to do. The Jesus who walked among us was divine as a word, an ideal, a spirit. Mortal eyes are fooled into seeing him as mortal too. Seen with the eyes of the soul, Jesus was an incarnation of spirit, as are all of us when we come to God.”

What else is John’s message but “Know thyself” restated in Christian terms? And yet no teaching is harder to follow. One despairs that Socrates and Jesus were both persecuted for telling the truth, yet it’s not unexpected.

If you want to see how challenging “Know thyself” really is, try to live it for a week. Once a person spends any amount of time looking inward, what is revealed is conflict, confusion, and a completely disorganized world “in here.” Fear and anger roam at will through the psyche. The shadow, which we touched upon in the story of Job, rules over a hidden realm of guilt and shame. Atavistic impulses like jealousy, lust, and revenge war with reason. Even if the inner world doesn’t reveal turmoil, the alternative may be a humdrum

conventionality that becomes more depressing the closer you examine it. “Know thyself” makes for a rough week and a challenging lifetime.

The status quo depends on conformity, not just the dronelike conformity of bees in a hive, but a shared agreement not to look too deeply into human nature. Unable to rid ourselves of mindless drives like lust, greed, and aggression, human beings bought civilization at a price. We gave up complete authenticity in order to stay safe and sane.

Socrates taught the opposite, as did Jesus. He taught that if you go deep enough, there is supreme light beyond the confusion and chaos, the id and the ego, sex and the lust for power. Only the light is real. In various guises, we will encounter this claim over and over as human beings ponder who God actually is. Diotima apparently passed the idea on to Socrates, and he took it to the streets. The Sophists were deluded to assume that the truth could be doled out in neatly wrapped packages. But Socrates may have been deluded to assume that the way to the truth can be taught at all.

The raucous, brilliant, rebellious, treacherous Alcibiades raises grave doubts on that score. He led disastrous military adventures abroad, the worst being an infamous war to conquer Greece. Then he abruptly turned on his heels and betrayed Athens by selling his services to the Persians, who made what use of him they could before killing him. Socrates taught a high-born, gifted pupil who wound up making no use of his teaching whatever. When Alcibiades drunkenly breaks into a banquet, he insists on lying on the couch closest to his old teacher, and when the company takes to praising Socrates (this is in Plato’s *Symposium*), Alcibiades’s voice is the loudest. But he was not a good man. In our day, preachers would frown and call him godless.

Yet every morality tale needs a prodigal son, which is what Alcibiades turned into. The difference is that he wasn’t redeemed. That concept, which requires grace to descend from God to touch a person’s soul, has yet to arrive on the scene. Reflecting on Socrates, a skeptic may ask how much good

wisdom has done anyone. Isn't God about faith in the end? Not necessarily. In India there is a saying about the spiritual path: "One spark is enough to burn down the whole forest."

Which is to say, once you've glimpsed the light, eventually the darkness will be conquered. Socrates brought the light of the mind. He wasn't so much a gadfly as a spark (he used a homelier term, calling himself a midwife to the truth), but whether the truth needs to be born like a fragile infant or revealed by burning down the forest of ignorance, the end result is the same. Reality is the light, and the light can only be found in ourselves. In the words "Know thyself" is buried a new belief, that human nature is capable of reaching God without dogma, authority, and fear. The inner journey is afoot, and God has become the highest goal: complete self-knowledge. To quote another Indian saying, "This is wisdom you cannot learn; you must become it."

3

St. Paul

“I Am the Light of the World”

The Roman Empire is law. It is peace and efficiency. But above all, the empire is power, enforced by its legions, who spread terror everywhere at a flick of the emperor’s wrist. It would be insane to laugh at these things. That is, unless God told you that empires are like straw in the wind and crumble like dust in the hands of the Lord.

One man who had such thoughts wasn’t undone by them. They taught him how to survive. At this very moment he was parched and panting with exhaustion. He looked sickly and underfed. His limbs were like sticks with knobs where elbows and knees should be. No one would have given him much of a chance, if he had been sentenced to the galleys. But he hadn’t been, luckily. The judge was indifferent to religious fanatics, so to this one, who appeared on Rome’s records as Saul, he handed down a light sentence.

“Thirty days on the road gangs. And make sure he doesn’t get near any other Jews. They’re stirred up already.” As far as keeping order went, for the legions putting down a food riot was half the trouble of a God riot.

As Saul slaved on the road gang, sweat dripped into the scrawny prisoner’s mouth; it tasted salty and dirty. A light wind had risen over the desert, which was a mixed blessing, since it stirred up a choking dust even as it cooled your skin.

The prisoner next to Saul, a fat Cappadocian who stole a loaf of bread but didn’t run far enough before he started to devour it, poked him in the ribs.

“You, pick up the pace. That guard is watching, and he looks like he could eat nails.”

Saul nodded and passed a limestone block down the line. He never fought back when he wound up in prison, except with his tongue. You didn't know who might be concealing a dagger, even after the Romans did their morning search. Would God want one of his chosen to carry a weapon in self-defense? No. Of that Saul was sure.

Under Roman justice he was named Saul, and he didn't say different. Jewish names sometimes went down well, especially near Antioch, where the judges were mostly Jewish. Otherwise, he'd offer his Latin name, Paulus or Paul. There was always a chance of leniency for someone like him, born a Roman citizen. Leniency was nothing more than being given bread without green mold on the crust and water without black specks in it—good enough. If you could look in his heart, though, Saul was dead. He perished the instant Paul was born.

The watchful guard glowered at the sun overhead. He uttered an oath and turned his face away, so the pace slowed down again. The Cappadocian was bored enough to make conversation.

“What were you done for?”

“I scare people, some of them,” said Paul.

“How?”

“I tell them that God loves them.”

The conversation ended there. Paul smiled to himself. He was almost fifty, and so far what had he suffered for Jesus? He had been lifting rocks since dawn, and to keep his mind off the pain in his back, he counted up in his mind. Publicly whipped? Five times. Thirty-nine lashes minus one, given by the Jews, his own people. Clubbed over the head until he was senseless? Three times. Stoned? Only once, thank God. Already several brothers had died from stoning. Stephen was the first, a horrible way to be taken into God's embrace.

Paul's mind skipped ahead to avoid dwelling on the thought. Shipwrecked? Three times, including that one night he spent in the water, praying until dawn came and the

survivors were pulled from the sea. Most of his prayers had been about sea monsters.

After surviving such torments, he wasn't proud of his courage. Pride was a sin. The closest Paul came to being proud was this: among all the brethren, he toiled the hardest, walked the farthest, and bore affliction with utmost silence. He loved scaring people with God's love. The poor Jews he met expected to fear and obey the Lord. Paul showed them a blinding love instead. No wonder so many ran away.

Did he feel loved at that moment, trapped in this killing heat with the guards testing their short whips on their thighs, just for practice? Yes, he did. In fact, that moment was a supreme example of God's love, because pain was a reminder to look for grace, which was everywhere.

For Paul there were only two kinds of men in this world, those Paul had converted and those he might convert. Nothing else mattered. Even under the lash he never missed a moment to practice his skills at debate, running over his opponent's argument in his head.

If God is love, why do we suffer?

To remind us that we are children of Adam and Eve, who brought sin into the world.

But you say that your Messiah died for our sins.

Absolutely.

Then why are the Romans, who don't believe in the Messiah, lording it over you and punishing you?

Because they do not realize that they are damned.

Damned? Look at them. They eat grapes and sit in the shade while you suffer under them like a dog. So what good is your salvation?

"My kingdom is not of this world," said my master. I am promised a banquet in heaven at God's table. The faint sound that will reach my ear is the screaming of pagans in the fiery pit.

Just to imagine such a debate filled Paul's heart with a sense of victory. God had delivered him so many times that he might do it again, at any moment. The shackles and chains around his feet could turn to flowers. The guards could fall to the ground with shaking fits. Musing on this, he fumbled the next rock and almost dropped it.

Up the line a Greek Cypriot with half an ear missing and filed teeth growled, "Keep it moving. This is my last day. I'm not letting you screw it up."

"It could be your last day on earth," Paul said.

"What?"

"God may hurl you into the furnace, where there will be wailing and gnashing of teeth. Mind the Lord, my friend. He is watching."

The Greek Cypriot would have struck him except for the rock he had to pass along. "You're saying the gods want to kill me?"

"No. I'm saying that death comes to all. Have you considered how you will be judged? You should. You don't look like a man who lives carefully." Paul indicated the missing piece of ear. Usually he didn't preach in the middle of hard labor. But you never knew the right moment, until the Lord showed it.

On a mission to Philippi Paul had been jailed with another missionary, Silas. They were marched into a deep dungeon where half the prisoners were insane or paralyzed from the isolation and darkness.

Paul could feel Silas trembling as they lay back-to-back for protection, wrapped in filthy rags.

"Be strong, brother," Paul whispered. "God sees us." He had a premonition.

Just before dawn the ground began to shake. Paul woke Silas and motioned toward the door. The second tremor would come in a few seconds, and Paul knew without thinking that it

would be much stronger. The dungeon would erupt in terrified cries and a crush to smash down the door. God's timing had to be precise if his two missionaries were to survive. The second tremor came like thunder from the earth; the prison walls started to crack—they were like eggshells to the Lord—and glimpses of dawn could be seen among the falling debris. Silas sat up with a start, staring in confusion.

“Come, brother,” said Paul, pulling him to his feet before Silas was awake enough to be terrified.

The prisoners panicked, as Paul foresaw, but he and Silas were now nearest the door when it fell off its hinges. They made it to the stairs as the earth roared. Thick dust stifled the dim light, and a swarm of bodies clawing their way up the stairs pulled the two Christians apart. Silas repeated God's name as he clung to the shaking walls, groping his way upward. At ground level he spied a three-foot fissure in the outer wall and slipped through.

He bent over, coughing dust, his eyes running with tears. When he could see again, the scene filled Silas with awe. The earthquake hadn't torn the prison down, but made only the single crack that he had squeezed through. All around, the nearby buildings were still standing. The Romans in the barracks weren't even awake, until a solitary guard began to shout as escapees ran down the street, many half-naked and dragging their chains.

Silas called out Paul's name with one breath and praised God with the next, but as one prisoner after another squeezed through the crack, he couldn't spot him. There was no time to waste. The Roman garrison was alerted now; he could hear the clank of swords and tramping boots. The first soldiers on the scene made a wall of shields to push back the last stragglers coming out, and within minutes the opening was surrounded.

What choice did he have? Silas ducked into a twisting narrow alley and ran. He was still young, and he ran a long way before the burning in his lungs forced him to stop. He didn't know the town, so he couldn't find the cluster of small

houses where several Christians lived. Lost and alone, Silas tried not to think of his wife back in Antioch. He slid to the ground from exhaustion, his back against a wall that was still cold from the night chill.

“Look at this. Does bread get any finer? Eat. Terror is good for the appetite.”

Even before he heard the voice, Silas had felt a man’s shadow pass over him. He looked up. It was Paul, a glint in his eye and a round loaf of crusty bread in his hand.

“Don’t worry, I didn’t steal it. It’s a gift, from the jail keeper.”

Silas was astonished. “Who?”

Paul sank down and broke the bread in two. He muttered a short prayer and handed the larger half to Silas.

“I converted our jailer.”

Astonishment kept Silas from eating. “During the earthquake?”

“What better time? There was a miracle at hand. I couldn’t just let it go to waste.” Paul reached into the sack he wore at his waist. “Not leaving out olives and cheese, which our sleepy jailkeeper had set out for his breakfast. Don’t look so surprised. How many miracles do jailers see? He was impressed, and he offered this bread as a token.” Paul ignored Silas’s astonishment. “It’s good, isn’t it? I should convert a few bakers.”

Silas pointed to a stray dog that was sniffing at them from a distance. It whined, testing to see whether they would throw him a scrap or kick him away. “You’d convert him if you could, wouldn’t you?” said Silas.

Paul gave his companion a sidelong glance before deciding that this was a joke.

“Yes,” he said curtly. “He looks ready.”

Raising the next bite to his mouth, he noticed that his hand was trembling slightly. Paul felt immensely calm inside, but apparently his mortal body was stirred by the earthquake and God's intervention.

Paul considered this incident with the converted jailer a great victory. He reported it to the church at Antioch, where the strongest believers lived. Strong or not, they would falter if he didn't regularly reinforce their faith with good news. Faraway Jerusalem was harder to persuade. There the Christians were as suspicious of Paul as an old rabbi in the provinces. Mistrust grew, no matter how many miracles he reported. Called before the assembled faithful in Jerusalem, Paul had to defend himself. His persecution of Christians as Saul was well remembered. For now, the Romans were lax about letting Christians assemble, and when Paul appeared, the torch-lit hall was full.

The elders, some of them styled as apostles, sat on a raised platform. Paul was reminded too clearly of judges' benches. If he was inclined to be nervous, he rose in a fit of anger.

"I am not here to be looked down upon," he began. "Judge me as you wish. I have a calling no one here can challenge. If you speak against me, you speak against the mission I was given by Jesus."

This was a brazen claim, and it caused such an uproar that he couldn't continue.

"You never met Jesus!" a voice shouted. Half a dozen others took up the cry.

Paul raised his hands to quiet their outrage. "I met Jesus in spirit. If you truly knew him, you would understand."

The outcry against him doubled. His impudence was shocking. The leaders in Jerusalem had claimed sole authority since the crucifixion. Chiefly they were two, Peter, the preeminent disciple, and Jesus's own brother, James. Both were seated in the company, but neither showed any reaction.

Paul raised his voice over the din. “How can you deny me? If you say that only you who were with the Master are the true church, it will die when you die. Is that what you want?”

He didn’t wait for a reply. “I know how you distrust me. I am a Roman citizen by birth, and the Romans hate us. I persecuted you myself, because your beliefs were beyond reason. Back in Rome they don’t understand a king who is not of this world. Neither did I. But you also know what happened to me when I saw the light.”

“What you *say* happened,” an angry voice shouted.

“So that’s it?” Paul shouted back. “The Lord calls me, but you have the right to sit over him? If I don’t win your love, then God’s love is cancelled?”

The murmuring quieted. Paul felt the slightest wave of sympathy; he had to play on it.

“When he was teaching, anyone could set eyes upon Jesus,” he said, “including the foolish eye, the ignorant eye, the lustful, vain, proud eye. I don’t demean what you saw. You have a blessed eye, because you saw the Lord incarnate. At the same time, don’t demean what I saw.”

The disgruntled had quieted down completely; he was beginning to win them over. But Paul knew that very few of them had the courage to think for themselves; they looked at Simon Peter to find out what he thought.

With a faint gesture that brought total silence, Peter had something to say. “The Lord’s blessing falls on everyone, like the rain. Didn’t our Master say so? Then how would you separate the worthy from the unworthy?”

It was an ambiguous utterance, and Paul faced it head-on. “The man I once was, Saul of Tarsus, would be unworthy if he were standing here. By the grace of the Lord he is dead. I had a second birth.”

Grumbling arose; he had gone a step too far. The brothers were tired of hearing about Paul’s miracle story. How Saul the zealous persecutor of Christians had been struck from his

horse while riding from Jerusalem to Damascus. How the light of Christ blinded him for three days, until it was restored by a gentle brother, Ananias. Paul repeated it in every sermon before Jews and gentiles. Some might call that vanity.

Now an old man, Cleopas slowly elbowed his way to the front; the company respectfully gave way. He nodded at Simon Peter, who said, "Bear witness." The room became quiet again.

"I was too afraid to walk with the Master that terrible last day," said Cleopas. "I didn't pick up his cross when he stumbled. From a distance I beheld the three crosses being raised on Golgotha, and I ran away." Cleopas gestured toward Paul. "Is not my unbelief greater than his?"

Someone vigorously shouted, "No!"

Cleopas ignored him. "Our brother Paul preaches that even the worst may be saved through faith. He is stronger than me in that too. Let me tell you why."

The old man unfolded a story. He and another disciple were walking away from Jerusalem after the Romans executed Jesus. It was better to leave the city quickly, for their own safety. The Pharisees might convince Pilate to crucify Jesus's disciples next.

On the road Cleopas said little, lost in his guilty thoughts, until his companion began to weep. He rejected Cleopas's attempts to comfort him. "We'll never see him again. Our devotion was a waste," the companion cried. "We followed a false messiah. Don't you see that?"

His companion's rashness upset Cleopas, who was naturally gentle, but he had to speak out now. "I've seen him heal the sick with my own eyes. So have you. And what of the three women, and the angels?"

Three women of Galilee, including Mary Magdalene, had followed Jesus and his disciples as they wandered. These same three had gone to the tomb of Jesus that morning and found it empty. Suddenly, as they stood in confusion, angels appeared

to them announcing that Jesus was alive. Death was nothing to God, and he had lifted his son from the grave. When the women ran back to the disciples with this news, an uproar occurred; one faction rejoiced while the other angrily denounced the thieves who had stolen Jesus's body during the night.

"I saw you rejoice with the women," Cleopas reminded his companion, who would have replied sharply, but they were interrupted by a stranger approaching on the road. Instead of nodding and passing on his way, the stranger gave them a penetrating look.

"What were you just talking about?" he asked, speaking in Aramaic.

The two disciples shrugged nervously, unwilling to give hints about themselves. The stranger was a fellow Jew, but that didn't make him safe.

"You are walking from Jerusalem. Has something happened there?" the stranger demanded. He never took his eyes off Cleopas, who felt his heart burning with grief.

"You don't know? The city has erupted," his companion told the stranger, and he recounted Jesus's trial and his betrayal by the priests of the Temple.

"So the Jews are squabbling over the Messiah again," said the stranger.

"Of course, what else?"

"Messiah fever ends with sticks and stones," the stranger mused.

But the fever had not broken. Under Herod the Romans had recently redoubled their persecutions. More than ever, the Jews needed a mighty leader to drive the invaders from the holy land.

"You are a Jew," said Cleopas, overcoming his wariness. "You must feel the same need as we do."

“So, the Messiah will come when our people are most in need?” the stranger asked. “Then why hasn’t he? We’re desperate enough.”

“We thought he did come,” the companion replied in dejection.

“Did he arm you? I don’t see weapons unless you are hiding them under your cloaks,” the stranger remarked.

“Jesus was a man of peace,” Cleopas interjected.

“Then you must expect two messiahs. One to defeat Caesar, the other to calm the waters.”

The stranger’s talk was challenging, and the three became absorbed. He took them back to Moses and visited everything that scripture said about the Messiah, that he would be persecuted and misunderstood, that the learned would not understand, but only the simple of heart. He would be a man of sorrows on this earth, but a king in heaven.

“Our Master *is* in heaven,” cried Cleopas.

He was shaken by the anger that flared up in the stranger’s voice. “Your master has fools for followers if he shows them miracles and still they do not believe.” This was his only outburst, and it subsided quickly.

When they reached the village of Emmaus, Cleopas knew a place friendly to disciples, and he invited the stranger, who was about to continue on, to have supper with them there. Seeing the darkening sky, he agreed.

At this point in his tale Cleopas had a hard time suppressing his emotion, which happens with old men, but he was not ashamed of it as many old men are.

“We sat down at table, the bread was brought. The stranger bent his head to bless it, and when he broke bread, our eyes were opened. It was Jesus! God had blinded us to test our faith. Even as I rejoiced to see our Master again, I trembled inside. For three days I had doubted him. How could I believe in a Messiah that the Romans could kill at their whim?”

The old man pointed to Paul, raising his voice, which no longer quavered. “If I can be blessed to see our Master alive, so can he.”

It was a stunning moment, and Paul had to force himself not to follow it up with more rhetoric. He embraced Cleopas and waited while he slowly hobbled back to his seat. Did Peter, leaning back in his rough wooden chair, betray suspicion in his eyes or approval? Paul, who had to read men well in order to survive, didn’t care. He showed a careless disregard as he looked away. The spirit had anointed him. It didn’t matter a straw what Peter, the great Simon Peter, thought about it. If Jesus wasn’t a king of this world, didn’t it follow that his true disciples were not of this world either?

The atmosphere had relaxed by now. From his throne Peter nodded without comment. He would relent that far, at least. If winning were enough, this was the end of it. But who said that winning was enough for Paul?

To the crowd he said, “I sense that you have given me your approval. But not everyone with his full heart. I don’t care, because I love you all fiercely, as souls baptized in the name of the Holy Spirit.

“I see you as ghosts compared to unbelievers. Your flesh is a mirage. You are really the light of God. I say this to you, and I would say the same to Caesar before he killed me, or to the next gentile as he is about to spit on me.”

Paul intended these words to create a stir, and they did. Jerusalem buzzed like a hornets’ nest all week. Jerusalem was happy to see his back as Paul went on the road. Let him go and be as reckless as he wanted, people said. The Lord would protect him—or not.

The miracles never ceased. Paul converted the masses, one person at a time. Many were so fervent in their belief that they witnessed the risen Christ with their own eyes. Rome became nervous. These Christians believed in the impossible, and yet

the impossible kept spreading without check, infecting one town after another. Local officials kept reassuring Rome that everything was under control. In fact, they could hardly tell Jews from Christians. Why even bother? Both had grandiose fantasies about a Messiah who would overthrow Caesar. The only difference was that the Christians had had their Messiah, and now he was dead.

When miracles are abroad, people want more, and this left room for magicians. Paul was set against their kind: magus or sorcerer, whatever title they fancied, they were blasphemers and sons of the Devil. But it wasn't yet the Lord's will for Paul to fight them. He bided his time, converting two thieves in one jail. Sometime later, when he had returned a third time to the faithful in Antioch, God's hand moved over Paul. He was guided to Cyprus; the sea looked dark as he made the passage over.

"Do you see anything there, brother?" he asked Barnabas, the disciple whom God had picked for his companion. Puzzled, Barnabas gazed into the waters, which were unusually still; he shook his head.

"Fish?" he said.

Paul smiled. The calm sea, glassy and still, was like a mirror. Not one to see yourself in, but one to see through. Just as the face hides the soul, a reflection in a mirror hides what lies behind it. Infinite love was veiled by a woman's eyebrow that needed plucking, a rouged cheek, the first wrinkles of a preening lover gazing at himself when his mistress wasn't looking. Vanity makes us love the reflection, which is why God must send hints and omens, to stop our self-love and force us to see the truth.

They landed in Cyprus, and Paul immediately had an inspiration. "We must find the God-fearing," he told Barnabas. This was a special term among Christians. It had become fashionable to shop for a god. Pagans had become disgruntled seekers, and a few knocked on the door of the synagogues. The Jews inside felt afraid, but some argued that isolation only

made them more hated. Let the pagans see for themselves what a holy place was like.

Cautiously the doors were opened to these seekers, who became known as God-fearers, because they revered God even though they had no religion. Even high-born Romans looked in. They sometimes heard the rabbi preach against the Christians, and this made them curious. On Cyprus there was one of these curious Romans, Sergius Paulus by name, who presided over the city of Paphos as proconsul. The local Christians pounced on Paul and Barnabas with great news. This powerful man might want to be baptized. One more sermon, a powerful one, and his spirit would surely cross over.

“I’d be ashamed not to convert a man named Paul, but what sort is he?” asked Paul.

“He’s a man of reason, a sensible man,” the local brothers said.

The worst kind, Paul thought, but kept it to himself.

His premonition was justified. Sergius Paulus was found in his house reclining on cushions with a tolerant smile on his face and a beaker of wine, half empty, in his hand. At his feet sat—what else?—a magician making cotton balls appear and disappear under a red velvet cap. He wore an even wider smile and was drinking from an even bigger wine beaker.

“Elymas, get up,” the proconsul ordered, wiping his mouth with a napkin. “Your God is waiting for you to defend him, and put down that wine. Yahweh isn’t Bacchus. He wants you sober.” So this Elymas was a Jew who had insinuated himself with the Romans.

Elymas turned to Paul without extending his hand. “I’ve heard of your prophet. The one who rose from the dead. I won’t perform that trick today. I respect you as one mind to another.”

“A magician with a mind would be refreshing,” Paul replied.

Elymas laughed with civilized tolerance. Paul was rankled, but he knew better than to be goaded. The two of them, the Roman and the magician, had probably concocted this little opening scene.

Boldly Paul addressed the proconsul. "I am of no use to a reasonable man, and you are of no use to me. My message is faith. Five hundred brothers and sisters have already witnessed the risen Christ. I am one of them."

Sergius Paulus frowned. "More politeness might serve you better."

"When a man's house is on fire, who does him more good, the servant who is too polite to wake his master or the one who pounds on his door?" asked Paul.

Elymas interrupted. "I can produce fire if you want," he said smoothly, "but nobody here is asleep."

"All are asleep who mock the risen Christ," said Paul sharply and turned back to the Roman. "I am not disparaging your understanding, but it takes no mind to see the sun. Reason is great; faith is greater. With his paltry sorcery this magician may persuade you of anything. Falseness is his trade. But I bring you a matter of life and death. Don't fritter it away because you are amused by illusions."

Sergius Paulus saw an opening for a contest. "Will you take this lying down?" he asked Elymas.

"I am not offended. Jesus was a great magus. His followers call him the Holy Spirit. But I am master of spirits, and they speak when I command." Elymas bowed to Paul with mock respect. "Even if your sincerity is undoubted."

"Are you entertained by your own blasphemy?" Paul asked.

"As entertained as you are by your own rhetoric," said Elymas. "Why do you think the Romans are masters over us Jews? They use reason; they laugh at superstition. I suspect you rail against me, because you know that you have already lost before you began."

The proconsul was enjoying himself, and Paul allowed the magician his oily arguments. He had to, until the Lord told him what to do. All at once, he did.

Paul turned fiercely on Elymas. “Unrighteous sinner, you shame yourself in the eyes of God. He knows you, and he is angry.”

Paul raised his hand. The gesture looked so much like a magician’s that Elymas smiled.

“The Holy Spirit commands!” Paul shouted.

Suddenly Elymas groped at the air. Then with a moan he collapsed on the ground.

“Do you see it, proconsul? I do, and so does this wretch,” Paul declared.

The Roman, who had jumped to his feet, looked bewildered. “See it? What do you mean?”

“The Lord has surrounded him with a dark mist. Now he’s clawing the empty air. For a season this blasphemer will be blind.”

“Elymas, take my hand,” Sergius Paulus commanded. He held his outstretched hand a foot from the magician’s face, but Elymas only made pitiful noises as he reached toward emptiness.

The proconsul was shaken, but only for a moment. Magi visited every day. The new one knew higher magic. “Stay. Teach me,” he said, searching in his toga for some gold coins.

Paul shook his head. “All you care about is power.”

“Which I will share with you. Come.” The proconsul had found some gold and waved it in the air.

Paul pointed to the blind magus. “Here is power beyond your understanding. It was not my mind that did it, and your mind is equally useless before God.”

He started to leave, and the Roman almost called for soldiers to block his way. His hand was halfway to the bell

cord. But Paul stopped of his own accord, returning and kneeling by Elymas, who was no longer making a sound.

Paul spoke to him. “This Roman has no more use for you. In an hour you will be wandering the streets helplessly, begging to be healed. Nothing will help. But in a few months the blindness will lift of its own accord. The Holy Spirit has done this thing.”

Elymas clutched at Paul’s arm. “Take me with you.”

“You would suffer more than you do now.”

“No!” Sheer panic was in the magus’s voice.

The spirit shifted in Paul from anger to gentleness. “Jesus preached, ‘I am the light of the world.’ He did not call himself the light of Jerusalem or the light of the Jews.”

“But he is the Messiah,” Elymas murmured. “He must be for the Jews.”

“Which means you own him, as a Jew owns a cow or a prayer shawl?” Paul leaned closer and reduced his voice to a whisper. “Hear me, sorcerer. *He owns you.* That is all you need to think on. There is no debate worth having.”

He was ready to leave now, and he shot the Roman a hard glance, making his hand fall from the bell cord.

“So you won’t help him? You know very well that I’m going to have him dragged into the street,” said Sergius Paulus.

Paul shook his head and walked away.

Later, Paul related the incident to Barnabas, who related it to the brothers in Cyprus.

Soon it spread throughout the Christian world. Skeptics in Jerusalem said nothing. They kept their counsel, suspicious of the man who rode to Damascus and no less suspicious of the man who was riding to grace. Paul didn’t care. He saw every convert he had made standing behind him, every possible

convert waiting up ahead. It was only a matter of time before they lined the whole road as far as God's eye could see.

Revealing the Vision

If you were to meet someone from the golden age of Athens on the street today, you might look down on their belief in gods sitting atop Mount Olympus, enjoying a never-ending party at human expense as they roiled the seas, inflicted famine, and destroyed individuals at will. But those fifth-century Athenians might look down on you for believing that God is a matter of faith. In the Christian era the divine light moved from the mind to the soul. God rose above the natural world. He no longer roiled the seas or bothered with thunderbolts. He became more wondrous and mysterious. He kept one of his old ways, however, that of forcing his devotees into peril.

Two peculiar phenomena dominate the early Christian church: miracles and martyrdom. They account for why the new religion spread like wildfire. Early Christians were on the receiving end of persecution, but also the gift of visible miracles. In the first generation after the crucifixion, all of Jesus's closest followers died for their beliefs, and when a rabid mob stoned Stephen, the first martyr, only a year or two after the crucifixion, they were goaded on by a hater of the new faith, Saul of Tarsus.

How this persecutor named Saul turned into Paul and became the greatest single shaper of Christianity is one of the crucial conversions in human history. Paul's experience on the road to Damascus has become the prototype for all dramatic conversion stories. Being blinded by the light, which is what happened to Saul on his journey to inflict more pain on Christians, defines the essence of experiencing God in a sudden epiphany. But there's a larger question to ask. Why should the threat of a violent death cause a religion to spread? Persecution is usually quite effective, for a short or a long time, at keeping the powerless downtrodden.

Christianity had a secret weapon. Martyrdom opened the way to miracles. This connection was made from the very beginning. The crucifixion was an act of utmost violence, but it led to the resurrection, an event of supreme miraculousness. St. Paul played a central role in cementing this connection. He insisted that a true Christian must believe in the literal fact of the resurrection. Soon, to die for Jesus became a sacrifice that ensured a passage to heaven. The fact that the same belief exists in Islam derives directly from Christianity; both are “religions of the Book” that promise salvation in the afterlife, placing the physical world so far below heaven that inviting death in God’s name is a righteous act.

Paul also states that five hundred converts had personally witnessed the risen Christ. If that is so, then the early church was the focus of the greatest mass mystical event in history. Paul’s writings survive in the form of a sheaf of letters sent to congregations in Ephesus, Corinth, and other areas from Israel to Asia Minor. Scholars believe that these letters could be the earliest genuine record of Christianity, predating even the writing of the four Gospels.

Be that as it may, the force of Paul’s mind prevailed. If only the first letter to the Corinthians had survived, his words would be indelible, since they are written with such passion and confidence:

Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. (13:4–6)

These words echo Jesus, of course, but they are all the more reassuring because they come from a flawed mortal who had been transformed. In another voice Paul can chide and correct the newly formed believers. In yet another he sets down in plain language what it means to enter the miraculous world opened by Christ:

When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man, I

gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood. (13:11–12)

The poetic writing is breathtaking. The mind behind it had to work against unseen opponents, however, to win the day. We don't know if Paul was a rival to Peter, Jesus's most favored disciple, or James, the brother of Jesus, who had the strongest hereditary claim to lead the new faith. I portray them in conflict because the picture of early Christianity has been turned on its head in the past fifty years. It was once accepted that after the crucifixion there was a uniform religion led by Peter and the other apostles, but this picture depended on the absence of contrary scripture like the Gnostic gospels. When they came to light, very late in the game, these documents revealed a contentious, fermenting situation full of power struggles. Some very diverse beliefs were held by various groups for centuries until they were branded as heresy.

I've placed Paul at the center of this turbulence and portrayed him as a spiritual warrior. We cannot say which of the early church leaders was the most charismatic, but it is undeniable that the volatile mixture of mysticism and violence needed Paul to stabilize it. Without him, the Christian God would be even more confusing and contradictory than he is already.

Words like "confusing" and "contradictory" are not used by devout Christians, but the New Testament is full of peace juxtaposed with punishment, forgiveness with vengeance. Christ predicted universal peace on earth, yet he is also quoted saying, "I have come not to bring peace, but a sword" (Matt. 10:34). I've already touched on the fact that the shock of the crucifixion left the early followers of Jesus feeling left behind. They couldn't help but cry out, "What should we believe? What should we do?"

Some answers were radical. The Gnostic gospels, as an alternative to the four canonical Gospels, are a late discovery; they were found in 1945 by accident when two Egyptian

farmers wandered into a cave near the town of Nag Hammadi and found a jar full of ancient manuscripts. Their discovery, now called the Nag Hammadi Library, contains dozens of diverse documents. In the theological hubbub that arose after they came to light, the official picture of the early church was strongly challenged. Here were believers a hundred years after Jesus's death who held that God is both mother and father, that Mary Magdalene was Jesus's favored disciple, and that a congregation should gain nearness to Christ through direct revelation rather than written gospels. One document tells us that the crucifixion itself was an illusion. As the mob watches Jesus's agony on the cross, he appears in the flesh to Peter to tell him that only the ignorant believe in such spectacles, because they cannot see true spirit. In the modern era, these are fascinating possibilities, even though the Gnostic gospels are not part of any recognized faith.

We can't escape the fact that Paul's brand of Christianity crushed all opposition, and some of his harsher prejudices have cast a shadow over "Paulianity," a term that is both admired and denigrated. The bad side of Paulianity is that it is authoritarian, chauvinist, and puritanical. Sex, like all temptations of the flesh, stands against spirit, and only marriage makes it palatable in the Christian scheme. Faith must be absolute; church authority stands in for God's authority. If an ordinary person receives a message from God, it is mistrusted until tested and approved by the church leaders (in contrast, the Gnostics, whose name comes from the Greek word *gnosis*, which literally means "knowledge," accepted messages received directly from God—perhaps the Shakers, with their ecstatic epiphanies, are an analogy).

History is written by the victors, which is never more true than in the history of the early church. Leaving ancient arguments aside, the God portrayed by Paul is remarkable as an evolution from the past. To begin with, this is no longer a bargaining God, offering rewards for good behavior and punishment for bad. Divine love is now offered freely, as grace. It doesn't have to be deserved. In taking this step, Paul

solved the problem of the fall, when Adam and Eve were driven out of paradise. As long as the taint of their sin existed in every person, a lifetime's struggle against it was necessary and probably wouldn't work anyway. Sinners were always bound to backslide; such was the power of temptation and the weakness built into human nature.

But Paul offered redemption and salvation, wiping the slate clean. No longer frowning down upon his errant children, God sent his son with a message of transformation. Jesus is the perfectly transformed human being, the new Adam. He is all goodness, and he dispenses all grace. This would be inspiring enough, but the same transformation is also held out to true believers. Jesus tells his disciples that they are the "light of the world" and will perform even greater miracles than his own.

Paul portrayed a world full of the miraculous. Thanks to Jesus's sacrifice, an ordinary person could "die unto death," transcending the ultimate fear. The spectacle of early Christians singing hymns as they were devoured by wild beasts in the Colosseum proved that the spirit was more real than the flesh. This is the secret that binds miracles and martyrs. Miracles reach down, via divine love, in the midst of agony.

One searches for passages in the Old Testament where God is primarily to be loved rather than feared. The New Testament is full of them. To theologians the term *agape*, one of several Greek words for "love," defines God's bond with humanity, and the touchstone is John 3:16, still one of the most moving verses in its simplicity: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

It cannot be verified if these words were written before Paul's letters or after, nor do we know if Paul read them anywhere else. Surely both writers knew that the new message resonated with an old one: "By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible." Thus the New Testament echoes the mystical creation of the world in Genesis

—the visible world came into being through divine words: “Let there be light.”

Did John intentionally echo the Old Testament? That again we cannot know. Much is lost; much is legend. But Paul drummed one formula into his readers: believe and you will be saved. It’s not a universal formula. In the East, religions like Buddhism and Hinduism have no murdered saints, no emphasis on faith in supernatural events, no resurrection from the dead. Instead, the common thread in the East is consciousness. A religious person seeks to escape pain and suffering by finding a higher reality that leaves pain and suffering behind, rendering them irrelevant. The entire journey is done within, and therefore Gnosticism, or direct contact with the divine mind, finds in the East a refuge where it isn’t a heresy.

This isn’t to say that religion as it flowered in Asia lacks divine love and miracles. In popular Buddhism the young Prince Siddhartha was carried over the walls of his father’s palace, where he lived a life of suffocating luxury, on a magical white horse held aloft by angels. A devout Hindu sees the beautiful god Krishna as an exemplar of love. But Christianity isn’t a religion based on higher consciousness; it is based on salvation, the ultimate personal miracle.

To atheists, all miracles are primitive and childlike, a form of wish fulfillment not far removed from fairy tales. In a recent book for young adults, the British evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, who has become the outspoken voice of modern atheism, looks into miracles from a rational point of view. He concludes that they are fakery spread by charlatans, including the miracles reported in the New Testament. Science knows how reality works, Dawkins assures us. We need to get past myths and wish fulfillment, since they promote unreality. It’s a powerful, persuasive attack, if you insist that only the physical world is real and only the rational mind can deliver the truth.

But the argument loses its potency once you realize that spirituality is based on the irrational, not by being feeble and

childish, but by celebrating the inner world. There are levels of the mind where rationalism cannot go. Here we find the source of imagination, art, beauty, truth, faith, hope, love, trust, compassion, and most of the other things that make life worth living. To an atheist this sounds like a sentimental justification for believing in the unreal. However, if you look deeply, Christianity cannot help but be about consciousness, despite itself.

To enter the miraculous world, where ordinary people can be transformed, where God's presence is felt and death loses its sting, there is no physical journey. As Kabir, one of the most inspired of India's mystical poets, says, you can read all the holy books and bathe in all the holy waters without finding your soul. The soul is an experience, not a thing. All experiences take place in consciousness. This is undeniable even for so-called supernatural experiences of the kind that atheists scorn.

Whether he is loved or hated, Paul was a teacher of higher consciousness, demanding that the early church accept the resurrection, which meant accepting a world no longer imprisoned by natural laws. We think of Christianity as being about the life to come, when souls join their Father in heaven. But Paul changed forever how this world looks. He led a revolution of the mind by saying that coming back from the dead was not just real, but the most real thing that ever happened. His stubborn insistence that God dispenses grace to the whole world was the same as creating a new world. In my own mind, miracles don't cause distress. As Einstein said, either nothing is a miracle or everything is. That may seem like one person's belief system competing with countless others. Yet Paul added another argument for all the mystics to come. Miraculous worlds only await the touch of awareness.

4

Shankara

“Life Is a Dream”

Five old men, the village elders, had come to listen to the young stranger. But only one was actually listening. Two others nodded off in the sun, another was counting his money, and the fourth had smoked too much ganja that morning and was no longer present on earth. They were squatting in the courtyard of the local Shiva temple, but no priests had emerged.

“You come from the south?” asked the head elder, the one who was paying attention. “They have temples there. Respectable ones,” he added.

“I wasn’t driven out,” said the stranger. He waited for a question that wasn’t pointless. His accent already told that he was from the south. He wore the saffron robes of a monk and the marks of a Brahmin—those with the highest spiritual knowledge.

The elder who was counting his money stopped for a moment. “We grow our own beggars here. We don’t need anymore.”

The elder stupefied on ganja found his tongue. “Don’t tell him where I live.” His chin fell back on his chest.

The stranger sighed. Monks fell under the law of hospitality, which was sacred. But people whined about it, except in the backwaters, where superstition lingered stronger than in the towns. In both places an unwelcome monk could be kicked from the door.

“I won’t trouble anyone for food,” he murmured.

He didn't absolutely need the approval of the five elders, known as the *panchayat*, but he believed in showing respect. Besides, he would be stirring up trouble soon enough. There were always five elders in every village he came to, just as there was always a grove of five trees on the outskirts of town. Five is a holy number. Every child was taught that; no one questioned it.

Shankara felt the time crawl by. "I've been on the road for four days. I survived a bandit attack to get here. I only want to speak to your priests, and then I'll be gone."

"Bandit attack? Why didn't they kill you?" asked the head elder.

"They seemed interested in God, so we wound up talking." The monk gave a brief answer, not mentioning that the bandits had bowed to him and touched his feet before they let him go.

The head elder rocked on his heels. It was the hottest part of the day, and for awhile the monkeys quit squabbling with the parrots overhead in the trees. The air was sultry and heavy, but the clouds on the horizon meant it would take weeks before a proper monsoon moved in for the season. The wandering monk wore his begging bowl on his shaved head as protection from the sun.

"Your father blessed this pilgrimage of yours?" asked the money-counting elder.

"My father is dead. But my mother blessed me before I left. She had to," said the stranger. Again he didn't expand his answer. In fact, a tale circulated around his leaving. When he was bathing in the pool near his house in the village of Kaladi, a crocodile had seized him by the foot. The other Brahmin boys screamed and jumped out of the water. His mother ran to the bank of the pool, expecting her son to already be dead, but instead he was calmly waiting for her, the crocodile still attached.

"I must die to this life," he told her. "I know what my new life should be, and even this savage creature knows. If you

bless me, he will let me go.” The boy, who was only seven, spoke very precociously.

After that, his mother had no choice. The wandering monk was eight when he turned his back on Kaladi and took to the roads, which was astonishing, even in a land where highway robbers were interested in God. If he hadn’t found refuge with gurus on the way, the boy could easily have been snatched and killed.

Years passed. It was impossible to guess his age now. Fifteen, sixteen? He looked young, but his name was well traveled. Stories about the young Shankara had reached everyone in India.

“I really do need to talk to a priest,” Shankara repeated.

The truth was known but unspoken. The *panchayat* had assembled to greet him the moment he set foot in the village. The local priests hoped he would be bored to death by some old men. With any luck he would move on and not confront the priests. In eight years of wandering, in all parts of India, the stories were that Shankara had a devastating effect in debates. Wherever he went, God toppled, the god that paid priests’ salaries, that is.

The last village he had stopped in was like all the rest. The chief priest, born to a specific sect in the worship of Devi, the Divine Mother, sat down to argue with supreme confidence. He had ruled village life for decades and begun to believe in his own invincibility. Novel ideas didn’t frighten him, any more than a new summer crop of mosquitoes. He had tufts of gray hair on his head, with smaller patches on his chin and sprouting from his ears.

“You say that the world is an illusion?” he asked.

“It doesn’t matter that I say it. The sacred Vedas declare it,” Shankara replied.

“But you claim direct knowledge. You came here to dispel illusions, didn’t you? So make the world disappear.”

“All right,” Shankara nodded. “Wait until this evening when you fall asleep. The world will disappear, as it does every night.”

The invincible priest didn't smile, although he had to admit it was a clever answer. He said, “Something harder. You declare that all things, big and small, exist as in a dream.”

“Yes. Just as a man wakes up from a dream to see the light of day, so he should wake up from the dream of this existence if he wants to see the light of God.” They were both comfortable using the word “God,” since it was understood, after many centuries, that each of the many images worshipped in thousands of temples all wore a face of the same divine presence.

“In dreams, anything can happen,” remarked the invincible priest. “So if this life is a dream, you must grant that anything can happen here.”

“I do. Nothing is impossible for one who knows God,” Shankara replied.

“Ah. The maharajah has a palace so huge that a horse would collapse before galloping from one end to the other. In my dreams I can have such a palace. Can I have one when I'm awake?”

“I can exceed your wish. Strip off your clothes on the coldest night of the year. Stand naked outdoors for an hour. When you run back into your warm house, it will be better than any maharajah's palace.”

The priest allowed himself a smile, which was important. Shankara could always crush his opponents and wander to the next village down the Ganges, but he was determined to leave goodwill behind him. He didn't want his opponents to resent it when they lost the debate. Far better if the priests became pillars of a new belief.

The invincible priest wasn't there yet. “I can call on a servant to run into the jungle and bring back a cobra. If I laid a poisonous snake in your lap, would that be an illusion too?”

“I bow to you,” Shankara replied. “You know the scriptures well. For isn’t it written thus: ‘To believe in this world is like a man who stumbles in the dark upon a coiled rope. Unable to see clearly, he cries “Snake! Snake!” until the whole village is aroused. Now everyone runs around in fear until one man brings a torch and says, “See here, it is only a rope.” That is how Maya, the goddess of illusion, works’.”

“But it doesn’t prove that cobras aren’t real, unless every snake is the same as a rope,” said the invincible priest, certain that he was pouncing on a point.

Shankara replied, “I was proving that only the man who brings a light knows what is real and what isn’t.” He smiled. “Anyone who reads the scriptures grasps the point, doesn’t he?”

The invincible priest squirmed. The wanderer had perfected the technique of making his opponent accept the truth by citing texts that every Brahmin supposedly knew by heart. Isn’t that how they kept control over simple devotees, with holy words no one else could read? As he flattered the Brahmins, Shankara subtly turned the same words around. They discovered that, like a cobra’s sting, the sting of his mind was fatal.

It seems ordained that those who bring light into the world become shrouded with legends. Shankara was walking through a village one day when a gang of boys started running after him throwing marigolds in his path. He asked them why.

“We want you to step on one,” an older boy replied, although even he was quite shy.

“Step on one?”

“You are a *sidha*, a master of supernatural powers. If you step on a flower, we can sell it to heal the sick.”

“Who told you such a thing?” Shankara demanded.

The boys were confused and intimidated, but between them they told a tale they had heard about the *sidha* standing before them.

Shankara had taken a master by the name of Govinda, who lived in a cave by the sacred river Narmada. As was the custom, the disciple waited on the master, acting as his personal servant. Every morning Shankara would leave food before the mouth of the cave for his master's breakfast. One day, however, the river overflowed its banks, threatening Govinda's cave and the surrounding countryside.

Shankara prayed for guidance, after which he rushed to the cave and placed his small clay water pot in front. Immediately the pot swallowed up the flood, until God ordered the Narmada to return to its banks, for the flood had actually been a test of the young *sidha's* powers.

The boys' eyes were shining as they retold the tale. Instead of scolding them, he obligingly stepped on a few marigolds, reminding himself to return when the boys had grown into men, so that he could give them something more useful than legends—although it isn't recorded that he ever contradicted the tale.

When he arrived in a new place, asking to debate the most learned men, the Brahmins usually made the mistake of underestimating him at first. He was thin as a reed, for one thing, and when you're peddling wisdom, it's better to be fat as well as old. If someone pointed this out, Shankara would say that he didn't win by sitting on his opponents, only by persuading them. Of what? He shrugged. The truth.

"Isn't it arrogant for a stranger to come here and claim to know the truth?" his opponents argued.

"Ignorance is more arrogant," Shankara replied. "It claims to blind all men and erase what is real from their minds." He lowered his eyes. "Not that such a thing has happened here."

On this day Shankara and the five elders had been meeting for an hour. Shankara heard his stomach rumble. The one who kept questioning him was stubborn. He never ran out of questions, and each one grew more trivial. The wandering monk couldn't hide his impatience any longer.

“How much?” he asked.

“What?”

“How much were you paid to waste my time? Before you pretend to be outraged, I’ll say one thing. I’m not here to destroy your faith.”

The head village elder had worn a tolerant expression up until this moment; it vanished. “They say you topple God. We can’t permit that.”

“I see, so God needs you to protect him? I’m impressed. I’ve now met someone more powerful than God himself.”

The words were meant to sting, and they did. The head elder rose and gestured to the others. “I’m not so impressed,” he said. “I’ve met someone who thinks God is deaf and blind. But you’re wrong. He hears profanity, and he punishes it.”

Shankara stood up and moved in on the old man. “Is that why I’m stuck talking to you, because God is punishing me?”

The old man’s face reddened, but Shankara didn’t wait for a spluttering reply. He raised his arms and addressed the empty courtyard. “I was told to come here. This is a marketplace, they told me. The peddlers of faith set up their stalls here. So where are you, peddlers? Come, sell me some faith if you think I have none.”

From inside the temple there was no answer to his challenge, only the faint buzz of chanting. The priests were obligated to perform rituals almost without pause as long as the sun was up and several times during the night.

“Have it your way,” Shankara shouted. “When I get to the next village, I will bring the news that this is the home where ignorance loves to dwell. It has made its devotees too frightened to talk to me.”

A sharp ear would have detected a change in the buzzing that issued from the sacred chamber inside the temple; now it was more like wasps than prayers. After a moment a priest appeared at the door. He held the implements of ritual in his

hand—smoking incense, a bowl of water, some marigolds—as if he could barely spare a moment.

“Don’t scold me,” Shankara addressed him. “The rumors about me are wrong. I’m not here to topple God. My words won’t crack the temple walls.”

“Like all words, yours will vanish into thin air,” said the priest, who was twice the age of the intruder, with a brow as heavy as his scowl.

“Some words penetrate the heart,” said Shankara, more mildly.

In a child’s tale he would have had to slay the demons that blocked his way, but Shankara wielded a secret weapon. He charmed people, even when they thought that they should resist him. The priest’s scowl didn’t melt yet, much less his heart. But he didn’t call a servant with a switch either.

“We are both Brahmins,” said Shankara. “I come from a family that gave alms every day and performed the rites of *puja*, propitiating Shiva as you do. I respect our way of life, which was dictated by God. I respect you.”

The priest gave a slight nod.

“As I look at you, I think you are the wisest man in this village,” said Shankara. “If so, please sit and debate with me. If not, send the man who is considered by everyone to be wiser than you.”

He knew that he had caught the priest in a trap, his own vanity.

“If you respect me as a Brahmin,” the priest said, hesitating unless he stepped farther into the trap, “then you see that I am busy doing my duty right now.” He brandished the ritual implements. “Why should I interrupt holy work for idle arguments?”

“Because you need to see for yourself if God speaks through me. That’s what you’ve heard, isn’t it? That my words are divine.”

The priest lost his composure. “Outrageous!”

“Why?” said Shankara. “Isn’t it held that the first words came from God? Are not words the agent of reason? Therefore, if I speak to you with sound reasons, aren’t they from God? Otherwise, we would have to say that I speak for the demons.”

“Always a possibility,” interjected the head village elder. It was a lot of trouble to cleanse a holy place after a demon infested it.

Shankara smiled. “Even then, since all things are made of God, even the demons have divine nature once you pierce their disguise. So come, sit. Either you will hear the voice of God or you will have your chance to defeat a demon, and a very thin, poor one at that. He would be grateful for a chapati and a cup of fresh water.”

In the eight years since he left home, Shankara had repeated this scene hundreds of times, ever since his own guru, on the banks of the sacred Narmada River, had sent him on his mission.

This priest was craftier than most. “It would take too long for me to tell you how I serve God,” he said. “But there is a villager, a householder, who lives a life of perfect devotion. I taught him every lesson. Go to his house, and if his devotion crumbles before your arguments, return to me.”

The priest gave a flick of the wrist, which sent a servant to fetch bread and water for the intruding stranger. Personally, the priest had no use for wandering monks: half of them were crazy and the other half criminals in disguise. But Brahmin to Brahmin, he couldn’t refuse hospitality.

After the priest went back inside, the village elders relaxed, pleased with this outcome. They watched Shankara eat, which he only did after the required blessings.

“Your priest is clever,” said Shankara, “which he mistakes for being wise.”

“Why do you insult someone who offers you food?” exclaimed the head elder.

“Am I insulting him? I thought he insulted me, because he portrays me as someone who is willing to attack a devout man’s faith. If he keeps his faith, I must walk away as the loser in the debate,” replied Shankara.

The elders smiled, since they saw very well what the priest’s tactics were.

“How will I find this householder of perfect devotion?” Shankara asked.

“His name is Mandana Mishra. You’ll have no trouble finding where he lives. He keeps six parrots caged at the gate to his house. They argue philosophy all day and make quite a noise.”

As Shankara was sent on his way, he could hear the snickers of the *panchayat* behind him. He continued down the road until he spied the caged parrots, who squawked a warning when he approached. If they had philosophical things to say, they kept them to themselves. On the porch of the house a man was performing ritual offerings. Shankara knelt beside him, bowing with his forehead to the floor. Mandana Mishra sprinkled water to the four points of the compass, muttering a prayer. It took several minutes before he acknowledged that anyone was there.

“Apologies for interrupting your devotions,” murmured Shankara.

“There is no sin,” replied Mandana smoothly. “A guest at the door is God. We are taught that this is more important than daily prayers.”

He showed Shankara into the house and ordered his wife to bring refreshments, which she did silently. One look around told the story. Mandana Mishra surrounded himself with images of the gods. The altar for *puja* was lit with a dozen ghee lamps; the air was heavy with the mixed smell of

incense, burnt butter, and ashes. When Shankara explained why he was there, Mandana beamed. He was thrilled to be offered as an example of perfect devotion.

Shankara said, “We cannot debate without a referee. We could send for the high priest, but I want the severest referee possible. Would you agree to let it be your wife?”

The couple stared at each other, startled.

Shankara went on. “In a household like this, where God means everything, the wife must be as wise as the husband. If she says that he has been defeated, no one can dispute her. The last thing a wife would want is to see her husband lose.”

The couple agreed, and Shankara sat cross-legged on the floor opposite his opponent; Mandana’s wife, Ubhaya, sat to one side .

“Words are empty unless something valuable is at stake,” said Shankara. “What shall we wager?”

Mandana smiled. “We are both too poor to wager much. I can offer a handful of rice, but you have nothing.”

“We have both given up any hope of riches,” Shankara agreed. “But we own something more precious. Let’s wager our path to God. If you win, I will stay here and become a householder, following your lead in every ritual and prayer. If I win, you will follow me and become *sanyasi*, a wandering monk.”

Husband and wife hesitated a long moment, but in the end the wager was accepted. Shankara was courteously allowed to set the topic of the first debate; he chose faith.

“I was sent here to test your faith,” he began. “But I don’t need to, for I see that your faith is like a cart with no wheels. It would be pitiful to challenge it.” He saw the offended look on Mandana Mishra’s pious face. “I’m being kind to tell you this. A cart is only good if it can take you to market or haul in your crops. Faith is the same. It is meant to carry you to God. But if you bow down and perform empty rituals all day without

finding God, you might as well bow down to a broken-down cart.”

Mandana raised his hand. “The scriptures command us to show our faith through these rituals you dismiss, and the scriptures come from God. Are you saying that God can be untrue?”

“Why do the scriptures command you to pray?” asked Shankara.

“It is not for me to question that.”

“Because it would show a lack of faith,” said Shankara, finishing Mandana’s thought for him. “This is false reasoning, for, like a dog chasing its tail, you say that one must have faith in faith. Give me a reason why.”

“God is beyond reasoning,” declared Mandana.

“If that were true, then any jumble of words could be called scripture. Nonsense would be divine if all that is needed is lack of reason. Madmen would be better than priests.”

“This is just trickery,” Mandana shot back. “Scripture cannot be denied.”

“Oh, so the dog has found a second tail to chase. Now scripture is right because it is scripture. If that were true, then I could slip lies into the holy books of the Veda and they would turn true simply because of where I put them.”

Mandana’s wife became alarmed, sensing that her husband was on shaky ground. “Tell him from your heart why we all need faith,” she urged.

Mandana nodded meekly. “You are right, my dear. A faith that doesn’t come from the heart is no faith at all.” He gazed benignly at Shankara. “Faith is the duty of every man, because we are put here to lead a good life in God’s eyes. You can’t persuade me not to be good. Faith is my bargain with God. If I obey his word, then when I die I will be liberated. The cycle of birth and rebirth will end, and with that, all suffering ends.”

“So faith will make you immortal and bring you into the presence of God?” said Shankara. “It sounds ridiculous. A murderer could practice piety, and by your argument, when he dies he only has to cry, ‘God, I believed in you. Liberate me, for what is one sin when I have so much faith?’”

“A murderer?” said Mandana. “You can’t equate such a sin with the life of a good man.”

“So being a good man means being without sin? If you are without sin, my dear opponent, don’t bother with faith. You are God already,” Shankara replied. “Ask yourself, why is this life full of suffering? Because men are ignorant of the truth. How does it serve God to have the faith of ignorant men? If you needed a house to be built, would you say, ‘Send me only those workers who have never built a house?’ It’s the last thing God wants.”

Mandana shook his head. “You can’t equate faith with ignorance. There are wise men who have faith. I imagine that you are one of them, or have you lost your faith by becoming so wise?”

Shankara looked pleased; he wasn’t debating a dolt. “The faith of the wise is different from the faith of the ignorant,” he said.

“Then grant me that mine is the faith of the wise,” Mandana shot back.

“I can’t.”

“Why not? Can you set eyes on me and instantly see whether I am wise or not?”

“I don’t need to. I will prove your ignorance to you. Let’s say you met a man who is selling amalaki fruit. You pay him, but instead of putting your fruit in a sack, he takes a scoop of air and, pretending it’s fruit, puts it into the sack. When you protest that he is handing you air, he says, ‘Have faith. There is amalaki in that sack.’ What would you say to that?”

“You know what I would say.”

“I do. You’d say he was a cheat. So is the faith of the ignorant a cheat. They pay for it. They eat it and say that it’s sweet. But what nourishment is there? None. How much suffering do they avoid? Very little. On the other hand, the faith of the wise is pure sweetness and nourishes the soul. How? By taking you where faith is meant to go. Faith is another word for hope. We have faith that God is real, because it is our dearest hope. I may hope for a child to be born to me, but until the child is born, hope flutters on the windowsill like a candle. It signals to God, but is not the same as reaching God.

“What does it take to actually reach God? Two things, knowledge and experience. The scriptures give us knowledge. We are told how to worship, how to perform our duties in leading a good life. More than this, we learn how to go inward to find the spark, the essence of God that is inside us. It is our source. Such knowledge, though, is only half the path. The other half is experience. What good does it serve you to know that a rose has a beautiful scent when you have never smelled one?

“Mandana Mishra, your house is full of hope for God, as an empty vase is full of hope for roses. Yet you can have the experience, and then your hope will be fulfilled. God wants to be felt, seen, touched. He is lonely sitting apart from us. In finding God you find your own essence. Life exists for no other reason. Know that God is your self. At that moment you will awaken to eternity.”

This exchange was only the beginning. For twelve days the villagers didn’t lay eyes on Mandana and his wife. They peered in at their window to see if the wandering monk had done something terrible to the most devout man in the village. All anyone could see, whether by the light of day or candles at night, were the two debaters sitting facing each other on the floor.

As dawn rose on the thirteenth day, Ubhaya began to weep. All three of them were exhausted. Mandana had run out

of arguments and resorted to repeating himself, mumbling feebly with heavily lidded eyes as sleep overtook him.

“It’s no use,” said Ubhaya mournfully. She was ready to declare Shankara the winner, even though it meant seeing her husband leave to become a *sanyasi*.

Before she could render judgment, however, Shankara raised his hand. “There is no victory unless I defeat your husband, but according to scripture, the wife is half of the husband. So let me debate you before you tell me I’ve won.”

Ubhaya was astonished, but she grasped at this straw. Everything that Mandana Mishra knew about God she also knew, but she had more wits about her.

“Does God want a man to have a worse life for believing in him?” she began.

“No. God is our own nature. He can only want the best for each person,” Shankara replied.

“If that’s true, how is it the best for my husband to become a monk? As a householder he gives alms, while a monk begs for them. A householder keeps the sacred fire burning; a monk shivers in the rain. On the road Mandana would face all kinds of dangers. You barely escaped death yourself, or so you say,” declared Ubhaya.

“You speak of danger to his body. It’s not the body that finds God or loses him,” said Shankara.

“I know my husband. He is meek. He will crawl from village to village in fear. Who can find God when he is constantly afraid?”

“Fear can be an incentive too. When you realize that fear is born of duality, you long to go where fear is banished,” said Shankara. He was reciting a holy verse that Ubhaya would know. “You are a devout woman; your husband is humble before God. Yet look inside. Aren’t you afraid that you may take one wrong step and then God will crush you?”

“Are you deliberately frightening me?” she asked.

“No. It isn’t by being more afraid that anyone conquers fear,” said Shankara.

When Ubhaya looked away without reply, Shankara went on. “The world is divided because we are divided inside. In everyone the same thing is happening. Good wars against evil, light against dark. How can anyone find peace in such a state?”

“I was at peace before you came to our door,” said Ubhaya.

“It was the peace of one who is sleeping. A prisoner who is about to be beheaded in the morning can find the same peace if he manages to fall asleep.”

“But if the world is created out of good and evil, that can’t be called an illusion,” argued Ubhaya. “It’s the will of God, who made the world that way.”

“You are speaking what most people believe,” Shankara conceded. “But reality is slippery. A baby cries with rage if his mother takes away her breast. That is his idea of evil. A little boy playing in the fields will hate another little boy who throws a rock at him. That is his idea of evil. A Buddhist monk will wait by the side of the road holding out his begging bowl, and a passing Hindu will spit on him. That is his idea of evil.”

“Yet for all of them, evil is real,” said Ubhaya.

“Are you so sure? Experience whirls around our heads like a swarm of flies. But there can be flies in a dream too. They are just as pesky; if they bite, it hurts and we see blood. But when you wake from the dream, your skin is untouched, and you know that the swarm of flies was an illusion. It took place in your mind.”

Shankara swatted at the air, which always had a fly or two buzzing around because of the sweet smell of offered fruit. “What makes these flies real? Your senses, because you see them and hear them buzzing. But they would be like flies in a dream if you woke up. That’s the only difference. You know how to wake up from your dreams at night, but you haven’t

learned yet how to wake up from this world. You asked me if God wants the best for us. He does, and the best is to wake up completely.”

Ubhaya, who was genuinely devout, felt moved. But her panic over losing her husband was stronger.

“If Mandana follows you, will you become his guru?” she asked.

Shankara nodded.

“And a guru knows everything necessary to remove darkness?”

Shankara nodded again.

“But you are sorely lacking,” said Ubhaya, raising her voice, “because you know nothing of how men and women live together.”

It was the first time Shankara was taken aback. “I know they love one another, and God has shown me infinite love.”

“Men and women also lie together. What do you know of that? If you want to steal Mandana from my bed, how do you know that you haven’t deprived him of great bliss? And for what, a promise that you can lead the way to a higher world? You think it’s higher because a woman has never shown you any differently.”

It was a brazen speech. Shankara blushed and lowered his eyes. “I swore to be celibate. Whatever you are offering, it’s impossible for me to accept.”

Ubhaya laughed softly. “You say that it takes experience to realize God. Yet when this experience comes near, you run away. If you are so easily routed, why should my husband trust his life to you?” Ubhaya was an honest woman, but she could barely keep herself from stroking Shankara’s cheek if it meant that she might win.

He backed away, saying, “God wouldn’t deny me anything, and if this experience is missing, the fault is mine. Give me eight days.”

Ubhaya's heart leapt with hope. "You intend to learn the art of loving a woman in eight days? All right, but if you experience bliss, you must admit defeat." She stopped, knowing that Shankara had set a trap for himself. If he slept with a woman, he would be breaking his vows as a monk. It would be a sin for Mandana to follow him, no matter how clever his arguments were.

Instead of getting up to leave, Shankara said, "I will sit here and not move. No matter what happens, see to the welfare of my body. Keep it warm. Protect it from harm, and pour water into my mouth when it gets dry."

Although they were startled, Mandana and his wife agreed. For the next eight days Shankara sat with his eyes closed. He didn't respond to sounds, and when his mouth was opened to pour water into it, he remained as motionless as a corpse. Finally, on the eighth day, he stirred.

"I am ready," he said, opening his eyes.

"For what?" asked Ubhaya, suspecting a trick. "If you imagined the delights of the bed, that is more of an illusion than anything."

He shook his head. "I begged God to experience the love between a man and a woman without breaking my vows. You saw my body in this room, but I wasn't here. I was taken to the palace where the maharajah enjoys his many wives. For eight days I was inside his body. He is a vigorous lover, and his wives are skilled in every art. I have returned with all the experience you mocked me for not having."

Ubhaya felt the ground give beneath her. "If that's true, then you experienced tender, all-consuming bliss. In the throes of love, nothing else matters. If God wants the best for us, name something better than this."

Shankara replied, "After he made love, the maharajah was exhausted and his spirits dulled. He was listless, like a man without a mind. His bliss sharply came to an end. I won't speak of the other problems of the bed, the jealousy among his

wives, the fear that he would one day lose his powers, the suspicion that women didn't really love him but put on a show. But God offers bliss that is unending. It neither comes nor goes. Where I shall take Mandana, the fruits of divine love will make him forget the bedroom forever.”

Suddenly Ubhaya wailed and threw herself at Shankara's feet. “I can't bear to lose him! Why would God give my husband eternal bliss only to throw me into the greatest pain?”

Shankara replied gently. “The pain is not from losing your husband; it is from losing yourself. In this world the path of pleasure leads everyone to run after their desires. You have been fortunate. You could have been pursued by a man who wound up beating you or betraying you with another. Wisdom looks beyond today's happiness. Tomorrow Mandana's love could turn to indifference or even hate. Emotions are fickle. He could wither and fall sick; you might die in abject poverty. Knowing this, wisdom rescues us. It restores us to our true self, and with that, fear is banished. For as long as you are subject to pain, fear is your ruler.”

Ubhaya bowed her head and let her husband go. They wept when they parted, and he looked back many times before she saw his figure disappear in the distance. It was the custom for a *sanyasito* take on a new name when he renounced his old life. Mandana took the name of Suresvara. Wherever Shankara went, he followed; the years melted away and then there was a great shock. The master died at a cruelly young age, only thirty-two. They were staying in a village that barely appears on the map. Shankara felt feverish; the next morning he didn't wake up.

By this time there were many disciples, and a crowd followed the body to the ghat where it was burned to ashes. Suresvara saw to it that the ashes were scattered over the river with a hundred floating lamps surrounding them, like stars gathering to mourn the sun after it goes out. The disciples scattered to the four winds. Shankara had foreseen this. He established four great centers where wisdom would be preserved until the end of time.

When young monks were presented to Suresvara, who became eminent as a guardian of truth, they were looked upon kindly, but with a little pity. It would take a lifetime to absorb the teachings of Shankara. To keep up their courage, Suresvara told a simple story.

“I was walking with Master when we came upon a filthy man in the road, an untouchable, and I rushed ahead, shouting, ‘Get out of the way! A Brahmin is coming.’ Not for anything would I have Master’s body be tainted by contact with an untouchable.

“But Master raised his hand and said, ‘Who is supposed to step aside? If it is this man’s body, you know that the body is unreal. If it is his true self, which is infinite, how can he move anywhere? He already fills all of creation.’ And with that, Master fell to the ground and bowed before the untouchable.”

Suresvara recounted this incident, because he remembered how he wept when it happened and how shocked he was at the same time, as shocked as the newcomers were when they heard the story. Untouchables were still despised; that was a rigid custom, the way society was set up. Wisdom would have to wait.

When Suresvara grew old, he lay on his deathbed and regretted only one thing, the fate of his wife, Ubhaya. His own life had reached eternal bliss; he had no fear of not being liberated. Yet this one hurt pinched at his soul. He breathed his last. The room where he lay vanished, the four walls melting like smoke. He found himself in the high Himalayas, alone, with snowflakes pelting his face.

In the distance a small speck appeared, and after awhile Suresvara saw that it was someone on foot, walking in his direction. In a few moments a hooded traveler approached him. He removed his hood, but it wasn’t a man. It was Ubhaya, looking exactly as she did the day they were married.

Suresvara quaked and sobbed, “Can you forgive me?”

“What was best was best,” she replied.

“But not for you,” cried Suresvara.

“Shall I throw off my cloak and show you what I was reduced to?” she asked. He nodded, afraid to see her ravaged body and the rags she must be wearing.

In the driving storm Ubhaya dropped her coarse wool cloak, but she wasn't dressed in rags. Her body was pure light, more blinding than the white snow that swirled around her. She was revealed as no mortal woman, but the goddess Saraswati. Suresvara reached to touch her hem, and at that instant they both disappeared. Bliss melted into bliss. He had used his life for the one thing that matters most. The high peaks looked on and rejoiced.

Revealing the Vision

In the East, God didn't evolve as he did in the West. There is no punishing Yahweh, no biblical prophets, no redeeming Christ. Without those three ingredients, God's nature could follow entirely different lines. It is only by accident that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are three, and so is the Indian conception of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. But the fact that three gods are responsible for creating, maintaining, and destroying the universe scandalized Westerners when they first encountered India, for the same reason that they were scandalized in China, Japan, and other parts of Asia. “The gods” meant paganism; the benighted souls of Asia needed to be converted to “God,” the one and only.

The charge of paganism is still leveled at the East, but with a twist. With enough force, you can conquer a country and make conversion to God mandatory, upon penalty of death. But in Asia people shrugged off the difference between God and the gods. They had been taught that material life was *maya*, an illusion of the senses. It hardly mattered if the illusion contained one God or many gods. When the scales fell away from their eyes, people would see the luminous reality that lies behind the veil of appearances. As their life mission, the great sages of India, China, and Japan gave directions for

how to escape the bondage of illusion, which brought pain and suffering with it. If Christ taught that this vale of tears ended in heaven, Shankara taught that suffering ended with enlightenment. Since both paths eventually lead into the light, would Jesus and Shankara have seriously disagreed if they had faced each other in a debate?

That would have been a purely hypothetical question for Westerners arriving in India three hundred years ago. Most paid no attention to Eastern spirituality, since it was all dismissed as paganism. But when it was examined, the teaching that life is a dream seemed like dubious metaphysics or else poetic license taken to extremes. There are times when all of us feel as if we are walking through a dream. Some of these are happy times—as for a bride on her wedding day—others are tragic—as for survivors in the aftermath of an earthquake. A trancelike moment could easily be a slipup in the brain or a lapse of focus. But twelve centuries ago, Shankara declared that our entire life is spent not understanding reality. What we take to be real is a walking dream, one from which we must awake.

Shankara was not trying to make people feel that their lives were worthless, though. He held that once awake, having freed ourselves from illusion, we could master reality. His arguments were so powerful that he conquered all comers in debates that ranged the entire length and breadth of India.

This is a topic that shouldn't be restricted to antique debating contests or the sometimes bloody religious conflicts between East and West. Practical things are at stake—life and death, in fact. In one place Shankara writes, “People grow old and die, because they see other people grow old and die.” Outrageous? Not if life is created from awareness like a dream, for when you encounter any bad event in a dream, it vanishes as soon as you wake up. In a dream, if you contract cancer, you could be just as frightened as if you were awake. But if it comes naturally to dismiss dream cancer as an illusion, why are we trapped in waking cancer?

The modern-day South Indian guru Nisargadatta Maharaj was confronted with this dilemma once when a student asked him how to overcome the fear of death. This student was in great fear of mortality and urgently wanted an answer.

“Your problem,” Nisargadatta replied, “is that you think you were born. Whatever is born must die, and this knowledge gives rise to fear. But why do you accept that you were born? Because your parents told you so, and you believed them, just as they believed their parents. Look inside. Try to imagine nonexistence. You cannot, hard as you try. That’s because reality lies beyond birth and death. Realize this truth, and your fear of death will be no more.”

The logic is impeccable and suspicious at the same time. What makes it suspicious can be stated quite simply. If you spend a day at the beach, soaking up the sun, idly watching other people, and occasionally cooling off in the sea, everything seems real; the hours pass and events occur. If you did the same thing in a dream, a day at the beach might take only a few moments as measured by brain activity. Once you woke up, you would realize that your day at the beach was an illusion because it all happened inside your consciousness.

Shankara is saying that your “real” day at the beach also takes place in consciousness. Physically, this fact is undeniable. All experience is mediated by the brain. You cannot see, smell, hear, touch, or taste anything without the appropriate brain activity. If you view a rainbow, your visual cortex is at work whether the rainbow is seemingly “in here” as part of a dream or “out there” as part of the real world. We cannot prove that the rainbow “out there” exists on its own. Shankara says that it doesn’t. To him, all external things are experiences in consciousness, and the ultimate consciousness, the beginning and end of everything, is a universal, absolute consciousness we can call God.

It might seem that Shankara is reducing everything to the subjective. Actually, he is raising awareness above crude facts. Experience is far richer than the data that science uses to explain things. In a court of law you cannot objectively prove

that chocolate is delicious or why you feel that the woman you love is the most beautiful in the world. Yet that hardly matters. Only consciousness can explain consciousness. What we experience is real for us, uniquely and mysteriously. To someone with agoraphobia, a fear of open spaces, it doesn't matter that open spaces are harmless or that going outside is a pleasure for most people. To the phobic person, anxiety is anxiety. Shankara is saying that consciousness is self-sufficient. It creates the world, as a sleeper creates a dream. The problem is that we have forgotten that we are such powerful creators. Shankara invites us to remember again.

We could veer into a long discussion about science here, because science depends entirely upon objective facts. Subjectivity is considered unreliable, wayward, and far too personal. But after all the arguing, we only wind up in Shankara's clutches, because modern science has deposed the physical world entirely, which is his main point. Quantum physics has reduced the physical world to an illusion. Atoms, the building blocks of the material universe, are not solid, tiny objects. They are a whirl of energy that is invisible and has no physical properties like weight or solidity. In turn, this energy winks in and out of existence, returning to the void that is the origin of the cosmos thousands of times a second. In the void there is no time or space, no matter or energy. There is only the potential for those things—so what is potential?

To Shankara, along with the ancient Vedic sages in his spiritual tradition, the creative potential that gives rise to everything in creation can't be physical. This includes the creative potential in everyday life. Let's say that you discover that your four-year-old child is a musical prodigy or an extraordinary math whiz. As the days go by, his or her potential unfolds step-by-step, and you witness the flowering of a talent that began as a mysterious, invisible seed. When potential unfolds, it's not like a bag of sugar that you steadily empty. The more sugar in the bag, the more you can pour out. But there is nothing physical stored somewhere giving rise to more and more creativity. Instead, an invisible potential (such

as musicality or a knack for numbers) finds a way to emerge into the physical world.

God has done the same thing. According to Shankara, the only God that could exist is not a person, even a vast, superhuman person, but something invisible and yet alive, a kind of infinite potential that can create, govern, control, and bring to fruition everything that exists. This God cannot be limited; therefore, he cannot be described. Not that “he” or “she” or even “it” is correct. No single quality can define God, who like the air we breathe is mixed into every cell without being detectable. Imagine that you hand a yellow tulip to someone who has no knowledge of genetics, and you say, “What makes this flower yellow isn’t yellow. What makes it soft, shiny, and pliable has none of those qualities. It doesn’t sprout in spring or grow from a bulb.” The claim sounds preposterous until you understand the path that leads from a gene to a flower. In Shankara’s world, all paths lead from God, and all are in consciousness.

To name this all-pervasive source, the Indian spiritual tradition uses several suggestive labels. *Brahman* is the most all-inclusive, since it means “all that exists,” derived from the root word for “big.” To get at the impersonal mystery of God, the term *tat*, or “that,” is used. When someone becomes enlightened, three great realizations, or awakenings, are involved, like three stages of waking up in the morning. The first is “I am that.” I am not a self bound by a body and trapped in the brief space between birth and death. I am made of the same essence as God. What is that essence? It can’t be put into words. It is “that.” This is a highly personal experience, as all epiphanies are. But Shankara isn’t bothered by the subjectivity of such an astonishing revelation. To stub your toe on a rock is just as personal, just as subjective, and just as much a product of consciousness.

The second awakening occurs when the divine is seen in someone else. “I am that” expands into “You are that.” This widening continues until the whole world is consumed, leading to the third awakening, “All of this is that.” Once the

entire world is experienced as divine, one enters the state of unity consciousness. There is nothing that is not yourself, in its pure essence.

Shankara was established in unity consciousness; that is his claim to enlightenment. Can such a state be faked? Are there judges who can validate that it exists? Skeptics pose such questions because they don't accept the first premise of the Indian spiritual tradition, which is that consciousness is all. By accepting materialism instead—the doctrine that all things and events have physical causes—we can agree on all kinds of things. Rocks are solid. Fire burns. Pleasure is different from pain. You and I have a stake in such a world, so we don't question it. Shankara declares that you must stop having a stake in the world, and when you do, you will be set free. Rid of fear and worry, totally at home in the world, you become a child of the universe, liberated into a state of complete openness with whatever comes your way.

But what if you are the martyred Giordano Bruno, the Italian friar killed by civil authorities in 1600 after the Roman Inquisition found him guilty of heresy, and what comes your way is seven years of torture before you are burned at the stake? Dreams can turn into nightmares, after all. What is the true way to escape? Bruno could not, for all his brilliance and insight. There are two answers to this predicament. You can either wake up from this dream called life or you can master it. Here we touch on the human face of God. God forces nothing and expects nothing. Captivated by maya, or illusion, people have devised an angry, punishing, judgmental deity. You can devote a lifetime—or countless centuries—to pleasing such a God and end up empty-handed. You can spend the same lifetime defying God and still not escape life's pain.

But if God is pure potential, things change radically. Potential is infinitely flexible. A God of potentiality doesn't need to be obeyed, feared, or placated. He exists to unfold anything and everything. Our agonies arise because we do not realize the divine potential in ourselves, which can alter our fate. If you realize this fact, you may seek only to wake up

from the horrors of the dream. In that case, your goal will be to return to the light, where total peace and complete absence of pain exist.

Or you could decide to fulfill your divine potential here and now. In that case, God becomes much more human. He embodies all love, all creativity, all the good possibilities in life. With this realization, you don't seek to return to the light. Instead, you master the dream, a poetic way of saying that you expand your consciousness. Expansion is how false boundaries are dissolved. Psychologists recognize a kind of ultrarealistic dream state, known as lucid dreaming, that cannot be distinguished from being awake. While having a lucid dream, you are there, fully, with all five senses operating. Then comes the first hint of waking up. Perhaps you are immersed in a jungle adventure running from a tiger. You feel its hot breath on your neck when suddenly the faintest notion occurs: this is just a dream. At the same time, you know that no one made the dream but yourself, which is why it holds no danger.

Shankara describes a permanent state that is very similar, in which you fully participate in the world, but you faintly know that you are dreaming. This state of so-called witnessing is the Vedic version of what Jesus names as being in the world, but not of it. It's a very desirable state, because you become creative instead of passive. Poised on that edge before you wake up from your jungle adventure, you know that the dream belongs to you. Suddenly you are an author. Some lucid dreamers can even reenter their dream, willing themselves not to wake up. They can do this because they are, after all, the authors of their dream.

In the same way, you are the author of your life. It may seem that all kinds of outside factors hem you in and deny your authorship: disease, aging, the forces of nature, social rules and strictures, and ultimately death. But Shankara asks a simple question that explodes these external limitations: Has anything that ever happened in a dream actually hurt you? When you wake up, the whole dream is gone. Tigers, angels,

demons, pursuing enemies, and voluptuous lovers. All share the same unreality.

Mastering the dream is good news and bad news at the same time. The good news is that you are the true author of your life, with the capacity to make anything happen. To arrive at mastery takes time. There are cautionary tales, like the reckless, unfortunate Giordano Bruno, who saw the light, but did not escape the dream. Shankara outlines how to undergo the process of mastery, using all the tools of Yoga. These tools are all about consciousness. They teach you how to use your mind instead of allowing your mind to use you.

The bad news? It's not the prospect of failure. Once the process of awakening begins, it is unstoppable, even if you have to cross into new lifetimes to reach your goal. The bad news is that mastering the dream isn't like being Midas. You won't turn everything you touch into gold. The lure of riches, endless pleasure, power, and even saintliness starts to fade once you know that it's all a dream. Unity consciousness is the ultimate mastery known to the world's spiritual traditions, but it cannot be described in worldly terms. When the two domains of reality, "in here" and "out there," finally merge, a new existence dawns. It is indescribable before you reach it, which is why there's another saying that Shankara's tradition insists upon: "Those who know It speak of it not; those who speak of It know it not."

Making God disappear from the physical world is either a sign of progress, because it removes the self-centered belief that the deity must look and act like a human being, or it is a scandal, just as it was to the first Westerners, because you can't just wipe God away like that. He will notice, and his reaction won't be pleasant. What is liberation in the East remains heresy to many in the West. The only certainty is that God has more faces to show. Matters are not settled yet by any means.

5

Rumi

“Come with Me, My Beloved”

Defendants. Why don't they know when to quit?

“I didn't beat my wife, Your Honor.”

“How did she get those bruises, then?”

“I was holding a stick and she ran into it.”

Silence is blessed to a man of virtue. The Prophet, peace be upon him, was famous for his silence. When the men sat around the fire to sing and recite poems in the desert, he sat tongue-tied in the dark, hoping not to be noticed. Then Allah sent an angel to speak through him. Gabriel touched his soul, and with one word—“Recite!”—the Prophet was filled with God's truth. He surrendered to the miracle, even when the voice of God made him quake with fear.

In court it helped to think about miracles. The room stank of guilt and desperation. The next defendant would be like the first, armed with a tongue of brass.

“Your brother came in on you sleeping with his wife.”

“It was the coldest night of the year. If I didn't lie on top of her, she would have frozen to death.”

The court had no choice but to find the lot of them guilty. Not that the plaintiffs were satisfied. The next town over had twice as many thieves with their hands cut off. It was ages since anyone could remember a public execution.

“Am I interrupting, Your Honor?”

The *qadi*, or judge, blinked his eyes; he must have dozed off from boredom and the heat of the day. The air was stifling. There was no jury. The trial consisted of both parties arguing

their case, without lawyers or prosecutors. But this *qadi* liked to be backed up by devout jurists who sat to advise him. They were half asleep too. The plaintiff coughed in his hand, delaying to make sure that somebody was paying attention.

“There can be no doubt about the facts,” he said, raising his voice as if the courtroom was packed with awed listeners. “Abdullah al-Ibrahim ran over his wife with an oxcart. She was my daughter Aisha. Her ribs were crushed, and she died in agony three days later.”

A wail arose from the hapless defendant; this one, at least, was speechless. So far he had cowered abjectly, crouching on the floor without a word. He was sixty. The dead woman was barely twenty.

One of the *qadi*'s jurists raised his hand. It was Jalal al-Din Muhammad.

“May I ask our brother a question?”

The judge nodded; the dead wife's father frowned. Convictions went through the floor when Jalal intervened. He was mild and kept to himself, a scholar. He should have stayed where he belonged, nodding over the law by candlelight.

People knew why Jalal sat at trials. So he wouldn't seem like a nobody, his enemies sneered. Strangely, everyone among his enemies had land and gold, and they spent a great part of the winter, when the fields lay fallow, bringing lawsuits.

Jalal rose and approached the cowering defendant. It was fairly outrageous how he called criminals “our brother” and placed his hand on their shoulders.

“How many fingers am I holding up?” he said. He raised four fingers, standing no more than a yard from the defendant.

Abdullah hesitated. “Three,” he mumbled.

Jalal turned to face the judge. “He's innocent. Let's go home.”

He spoke quietly, but his words produced an uproar from the families on both sides. In the din of voices the wife's father let fly a curse. He had been a farmer himself before he gobbled up parcels of land during droughts. Now he was vain enough to keep his best silk slippers in a cedar chest, just in case the sultan came calling.

He vented his fury at Jalal. "Ridiculous! You're claiming that someone else ran over Aisha? No one else was there."

"No," Jalal replied.

The *qadi*, who had retired from his large rug-weaving factory, where half the women in Konya worked, called for order. "Then what are you saying?"

"Look at him. Our brother has milky eyes. He ran over his wife as she was bending to sort the stalks of wheat, so that the ox cart could roll over them. He didn't mean to."

The judge leaned down from his high table. "You didn't see her?"

The defendant crossed his arms over his chest, refusing to answer. It wasn't pride. If he admitted that he couldn't see, his sons would have the right to seize his land. He'd become no better than their slave. Abdullah had been covering his eyes for months, claiming that flies bit them, when it was cataracts all along.

The "not guilty" verdict made the spectators scream, half for joy, half in fury. The *qadi* shrugged. He knew how it was with these country folk. If Abdullah's sons wanted his land badly enough, their father would be found in a ditch or simply disappear. The judge wasn't happy about Jalal, even so, who was patting the blind old farmer and trying to assure him that he was free to go. Advice and interference were two different things. Making the *qadi* look foolish was out of bounds entirely.

Jalal found himself walking home alone. This would have been his wish anyway, even if a friend had caught up with him. He wasn't fit for company. He was having impure

thoughts, and it was dangerous to let them slip out. There was no helping that. Guilt loosens the tongue. It can take awhile. Impurity burrows deep and hides like a mole. But unfortunately guilt isn't blind like a mole. Jalal felt that everyone could see into his soul. If he bought a fish in the market and the old woman pressed his change into his hand to make sure no coins fell through his fingers, her touch burned. When she mumbled, "Thank you, sir," it was obvious she was crying, "Sinner!"

Jalal spent hours examining his guilt, with the precision of the Arab astronomers he admired so much when they mapped the stars. Was guilt hot or cold? Cold, like a frozen rock pressing down on your heart. Shame, on the other hand, is hot, like a fire spreading across your face. Guilt is nagging rather than stabbing, constant instead of intermittent, hard instead of soft. Jalal smiled to himself. He should have been a court physician, he knew the anatomy of his guilt so well. But court physicians are frequently executed if they don't cure the sultan. That was a sticking point. Jalal's guilt was not being cured; it was growing worse, festering like an unlanced boil.

He crept along with his head ducked and almost ran into someone. The man shouted "Hey!" before he almost ran over the absent-minded scholar with his cart. Jalal looked up and stepped aside, but the driver wasn't moving on.

"I have a question for you, sir." The man took his hands off his cart and touched his forehead with respect.

A pang struck Jalal. The question was bound to be religious. People trusted him to be wise, to give them a fatwa no one could dismiss. Now he recognized the cart driver, vaguely, from the mosque.

"Sorry, I'm on my way to—" he said.

The driver cut him off. "It is written that God forgives no great sins, like murder. I know that, but if I hate my wife and send her to live far away with a relative who starves her to death, gradually, you understand, am I a murderer?"

Jalal took a deep breath to steady his nerves. “Yes,” he replied.

The man shook his head, pursing his lips. “That’s what my cousin said, and he’s as ignorant as dried mud. Oh well.” He flicked his donkey with a light switch, nodded cheerfully, and moved on.

Jalal leaned against a wall, feeling terrible. He was thirty-seven, and for his entire life men came to his house, and before that his father’s house, with these questions. He was proud of the answers he supplied. They came quickly, for he had a good head for the Quran; it was a complex document. Allah didn’t always choose to make his words clear, and if he contradicted himself, that was his prerogative. The children of God aren’t babies to be spoon-fed. Who could complain? However knotty the Holy Book was, to complain was a grievous sin.

Impure thoughts came relentlessly to mind, and the worst of it was that his piety masked his inner rot. There were moments when Jalal expected a student to grimace, holding his nose, and say, “Do you smell that too? Let’s open a window.”

Then what would the teacher say to the pupil? “That stink is just my soul. Please copy the next verse.”

A flood of guilt swept over him. In the midday sun he shivered with cold and turned his steps toward the bazaar. He had nothing to buy; his wife went to market at dawn every day anyway. But when he was sure she wouldn’t see him, Jalal mingled with the noisy, jostling crowds. The press of other bodies against him made him feel less lonely. Merchants shouting in his ear distracted him from the misery of his impious thoughts.

In a few minutes he got the relief he sought. In the narrow byways among the stalls all kinds of bodies rubbed shoulders and poked elbows. Since all the best produce was gone before noon, sellers had to work harder to push the dates squeezed by

picky housewives and brass pots with tiny dents where they had been knocked on the ground.

“Fresh mint, there won’t be any more when it gets cold! Pomegranates picked from the Prophet’s orchards! Lamb fat rendered a day after they were born!”

It was all show, yet Jalal felt comforted by it, since it pulled him out of himself. He smiled at a young girl peddling silver trinkets.

“Very nice,” he murmured, thinking how innocent she looked.

The girl smiled and leaned toward him. “Look into my eyes and see the world before it began.”

Jalal was startled. “What?”

She raised her voice over the hubbub. “Your wife would look nice in these.” She held up a pair of hoop earrings.

Jalal was certain of what he first heard, and he was about to say so when it struck him that the voice had been a man’s. Some man had leaned in from behind and said those shocking words into his ear.

“Look into my eyes and see the world before it began.”

Jalal whirled around to catch the man, but by now he was lost in the milling crowd. Jalal’s ears burned; his heart raced. He didn’t want the girl at the stall to see him like this, so he rushed away, pushing into the mob. Anger began to rise in him as he repeated the words and felt more and more offended.

Strangely for such a mild man, he was suddenly overcome with fury. He pushed a tottering old woman out of his way and blindly kicked at a stray dog.

“Why won’t you look? Your eyes are small, but they can see across the universe.”

There it was again, the same voice. This time Jalal was quicker. He turned around and grabbed at the cloak of the man behind him.

“What did you just say to me? How dare you!”

He had grabbed hold of a black porter, an Abyssinian with a bale of cotton over his shoulder. The porter looked frightened and mumbled excuses in his native tongue. It was obvious he didn't know a word of Arabic. Everyone close by turned their heads. Jalal let go of the poor man, turned red, and dashed away. At his back he felt the sting of mocking voices.

He ran fast enough to sweat, although he knew very well that it was panic sweat. Allah read his impure thoughts. That went without saying. Now he was being punished, and it was only the beginning. Rebuke from God is terrible. Worse, it can be devious. Your own mind can torment you with words that could be satanic or divine, you never know which.

When the angel Gabriel first came to the Prophet, peace be upon him, there was more fear than joy. The angel said “Recite!” The holiest of holy books was being delivered as a gift—to whom? To a simple, troubled man, a merchant of Mecca, who craved to know God's will. Muhammad went to the cave often, to meditate on the sinful world and the feebleness of faith. It seemed as if every people had been given the word of God except the Arabs. They had forgotten that they were the sons of Abraham. Allah had every right to destroy them. Instead, he showered them with the blessed words of the Quran.

When a blessing arrives in a blinding light, however, the mind can become unhinged. Every Bedouin child is raised in fear of jinns and demons that can be inhaled while you sleep or tilting your head back to drink wine. The Prophet was just a man among men, and he had been raised in the desert by Bedouins. The sight of Gabriel filled him with panic. He ran outside the cave, stumbling up the mountain. When he got to the summit, his sandals torn, his feet bleeding, his only intent was to hurl himself off a cliff onto the rocks below. He was stopped only when he gazed up at the sky and saw the angel in a new form, spread out as a faint light as far as the horizon. Then Muhammad realized that Allah abides everywhere in creation. There is no escaping him, and so dying was futile.

How desperate that moment must have been! Jalal could feel it now himself, the panic of nowhere to hide. He wanted to clap his hands over his ears, shutting out the insidious voice. But reason took hold. The voice wouldn't return, not if he calmed down. Quickly Jalal left the bazaar. He found an empty square, a place he knew about where an old well had dried up. Nobody went there anymore. It was an empty place with blank walls on all sides.

Jalal arrived quickly. The square was vacant. He sat on the crumbling edge of the well, looking around several times to make sure he was alone. Gradually his heart slowed. He felt normal again, and almost safe. Strangely, his panic seemed to have driven out his guilt, because when he looked inside, there was a cool sensation of peace.

“Come with me, my beloved. There is a field beyond the reach of life and death. Let us go there.”

Oh God! Jalal's heart leapt into his mouth. He didn't bother to whirl around and find the man who spoke in his ear. There wouldn't be anyone there. But instead of jumping to his feet and running away, Jalal felt himself paralyzed, his legs as limp as a baby's. His body knew that there was no escape, and, like a criminal surrendering on the day of execution, it waited.

When there is nowhere to hide, we all hide anyway. After the angel inspired him, the Prophet ran home and shut himself in his rooms. For months he didn't tell his family about the divine visitation, and it was a longer time before anyone outside the household heard the first words of the Quran. For Jalal, things began the same. He ran home and shut himself up, away from the sight of men, but then everything sped up. On a cold, bright day there was a knock at the door. Jalal's wife was out; he waited for a servant to answer it, and when one didn't, he preferred not to shout and answered the door himself.

It was a stranger, dressed from head to foot in black and leaning on a wanderer's staff.

“I’ve come. I hope you’re better, although in your position I wouldn’t be,” he said. “Let me in.”

The stranger’s voice, in well-accented Persian, was soft, but compelling. He was somewhere around Jalal’s age, with the same scholar’s beard. Jalal stood aside to let him in. “In my position?” he asked haltingly.

“You’re twisted into a knot. God does that. When a contradiction is tight enough, the mind gives up.”

“And God wants this?” asked Jalal. He felt a tingle up his spine, but didn’t want to accept what it meant: the stranger’s voice was the one that had spoken in his ear.

“God wants you to be clear about things. Right now you aren’t.” The stranger looked around, chose the largest, most comfortable cushion, and sank to the floor with a whoosh of breath. He had walked a long way.

“Tea,” he ordered, as a maidservant entered the room. With a glance Jalal gave her permission to bring some. The stranger threw his staff across the room with a clatter.

“If you want to be an abject sinner, go ahead. The trouble is, you can’t be abject and proud at the same time. That’s why you are confused,” the stranger declared. The cushion he sat on, cross-legged and erect rather than slouching back, was near a window. Jalal had a clear view of the man’s bright, darting eyes. When they landed on Jalal, they seemed to laugh at him.

“We must all live with the knowledge of our sins,” Jalal murmured.

“Don’t evade,” said the stranger roughly. “You’re probably right to be abject, only you need better reasons. You’re proud because you think you’re better than the Prophet, peace be upon him. The Prophet hid under a blanket for two days after God’s voice spoke. You intend to hide forever. Isn’t that a kind of pride?”

The mention of God’s voice caused Jalal to go stiff. The maid arrived with the tea, so he had to seem calm while she

poured two glasses. When they were alone again, the stranger jumped in first.

“My name is Shams. I know about voices. For a long time I have prayed to Allah, asking for the companionship of one who can abide my company. He didn’t take me seriously, but then one day a voice asked me, ‘What are you willing to pay in return?’

“I said, ‘My head.’ When you despair of finding someone who understands, your life is a small wager. So the voice told me who you are and where to find you.”

Shams raised his glass in a toast. “So here we are. The two most fortunate men in the world—or the two most cursed.”

Shams’s words shook Jalal to the core. If he had the wits to act like a lawyer, he could have peppered him with a stream of suspicious and disbelieving questions. Something stopped his tongue. He leaned back and, to his great surprise, sighed with relief. He felt like a parched wanderer in the desert who has a vision of an oasis. For days nothing lies ahead of the wanderer but the same barren sands, and then, just when he has drained the last drop from his waterskin, he stumbles over the next rise and, behold, his vision is real.

The stranger, Shams, smiled. “I was in the bazaar the other day. I saw you, in fact. Among ordinary people I pass as a traveling merchant, a weaver. That is my trade, in fact; but I am the son of an imam in Tabriz, a great man.”

Jalal nodded. “The voice prepared the way, so I wouldn’t turn my back on you.”

“Just as the voice I heard prepared my way to you. We are both blessed. Not that I have forgotten the possibility that we are cursed.”

The empire of the Seljuk sultans was vast, stretching from the Aegean Sea across many lands conquered centuries before by the Romans. To the Arabs these lands were still *Rum*, or Rome. If you met a traveler from there, you might tell your friends that you ran into a *Rumi*, a Roman. But the world

would stick the tag on one man in particular, not that Jalal knew it yet. He, our Rumi, began to pose questions. He was less nervous, and he wanted to know everything about this Shams-i Tabrizi who had been sent by the will of Allah. Who were his people? Was he the fortunate eldest son or the bereft youngest?

“Who I am is unimportant. Let’s just say that I am you,” said Shams.

“And who am I?”

“An insect collector, apparently.”

“Why do you say that?”

Shams looked round the room. “Your books are scattered everywhere. You pore over the Quran and the law. In my experience, weevils and worms gnaw their way into old books, and since the words you read are useless, the only reason to hold on to your books must be that you collect insects.”

Despite, this, the stranger knew as much about the contents of books as did Rumi. To exchange learned words delights a scholar’s heart. It bores the world, however.

Soon enough Rumi confessed his state of crisis. Once the words started pouring out, he couldn’t stop himself. Shams was a tireless listener, but not necessarily a patient one.

“Stop saying ‘God’ all the time,” he snapped. “It gets on my nerves.”

“But we are talking about God,” Rumi objected.

“Alas.”

“What do you mean? You are a seeker yourself, aren’t you?”

Shams shrugged. “And you are a fruit seller who has run out of peaches. God used to be a luscious peach, the sweetest and ripest imaginable. He dropped like honey on the tongue. Time passed. The sweetness dried up; the honey turned bitter. Now what are you peddling? You cry, ‘Fruit here! Luscious,

desirable fruit.' But all that you have to offer is a dried, shriveled skin."

At first Rumi resisted. God, he was certain, isn't a peach. "I want knowledge. You give me poetry," he accused his visitor.

"Of course. If you have no roses to smell, at least their scent can be captured in a poem," said Shams.

Rumi threw up his hands. "Peaches. Roses. You're laughing at me."

"So that I won't weep."

"Meaning what?"

"I see the emptiness in your heart. You've papered it over with fine words. Moving through the world you get respectful nods from other men. But they don't love you. In fact, they hate you for your learning. They fear that you will find out their secret and expose them."

"What secret?" asked Rumi.

"That their hearts are as empty as yours."

If Shams continued to batter away at him like this, Rumi didn't know what would happen. He was exhausted after an hour. Any more and he might faint or fall sick. They sat alone in the room, surrounded by cold tea and dirty glasses, yet behind the door Rumi had a wife and two sons. After a while there was a gentle rapping from the next room. Rumi sat up, suddenly remembering that he had a life to lead.

Shams saw his eyes glance at the door. "I know," he murmured. "The world is with us, but only for a little while longer."

There was no menace in his voice, but Rumi grew alarmed. "What's going to happen? Are you hiding a knife?"

Shams refused to answer, gesturing for Rumi to go to his family. That night the visitor slept in a rough wool blanket outside the house, taking breakfast with the family, saying

nothing except polite mumbles. Rumi eyed him uneasily. By the light of a new day Shams seemed eerie, like an apparition that should have vanished in the night. Once they were alone, Shams told Rumi to ignore him.

“I’m your shadow today. Act as if you don’t notice me.”

“Why?”

“Nothing mysterious. I only want to observe.”

Rumi was certain that something mysterious had to be going on. He followed Shams’s instructions, forcing himself not to look over his shoulder as the day unfolded, a typical day. He prayed and studied and told his sons what was expected of them. He went to the *madrassa*, the religious school that he had inherited from his father, where he taught twelve boys to read and write. The hardest part came after sunset, when Rumi sat by candlelight to read the Quran. Seeing Shams in the corner made him too anxious to concentrate.

Without preamble Shams spoke. “I told you about peaches and roses. Now it’s time for candles and oceans.”

He smiled at Rumi’s reaction. He looked relieved that Shams was no longer his silent shadow, but he was baffled and a little annoyed that more riddles were being posed. Shams approached the candle that stood beside Rumi’s book, which gave off good light with little smoke. It filled the room with the oily scent of beeswax.

“If God is light, is he in this candle?” Shams asked.

“Perhaps.”

“Why perhaps? Is there a place that Allah is not?”

“No, but the light of God isn’t the same as ordinary light. If the candle burns out, can you say that God has disappeared?”

Shams laughed. “God disappears all the time. When people lose a child or their money or all their sheep, in my

experience they usually lose God. But that's not the point. Accept for a moment that this candle is God."

Rumi nodded.

"We worship the light. We call it God. But how many candles can you light, how many holy lamps or ritual fires, before you get bored? The light no longer stands for anything. It's just a smelly candle whose stub you will throw out in the morning. Do you know what that means?"

Rumi tried not to show his annoyance. "Tell me."

"It means that time is God's enemy. If something can die, snuffed out like a candle, it cannot be God, since God has no beginning or end." Shams held up his hand to keep Rumi from interrupting him. "I see your impatience. Hold still for a moment. Oceans."

"I'm listening. I've traveled and seen the ocean."

"I can read your mind when you beheld the ocean. *How vast, how awesome! This too must be God.* You contemplated eternity. So what?"

"Isn't awe enough?"

"Enough for what, to enclose infinity? You didn't even embrace the ocean. If you dipped a cup in it and took a bit of ocean home with you, after a few days it would evaporate. So much for your awe. Where is God in it?"

"Tell me. I don't want to guess," said Rumi.

"Nowhere. Space is God's enemy. The oceans are vast. You can spend a lifetime sailing over them, beholding their expanse. But still infinity would stretch beyond your eye. I've laid before you two truths you cannot escape. Time is God's enemy, and so is space. What can you do once you surrender to these truths?"

Shams hadn't changed his tone of voice, which was like a schoolmaster's. Rumi used that tone all the time, droning flatly as half of his students dozed off. But instead of dozing, Rumi felt his spine tingle. Shams noticed.

“Ah, the first glimmer,” he said with a note of triumph. “Think how long you’ve waited to hear my words. Sit back. Enjoy being stupefied. Bask in your ignorance.”

He was mocking Rumi, but what he said was true. In a flash Rumi saw his ignorance spread out before him. He had spent years praying and studying. He had traveled to the far reaches of the sultan’s empire visiting holy shrines. But if God was beyond time and space, none of it mattered.

Shams leaned close enough that Rumi felt his warm, moist breath. “You have tried to capture the sea in a teaspoon and the sun in a candlestick. Stop.”

Rumi trembled. The room felt small and dark; he wondered if he shouldn’t be afraid of Shams. Wouldn’t you be afraid of inviting an assassin into your house? An assassin of the mind is more fatal. The instant this thought came to Rumi, the candle burned out, and without warning he felt Shams’s arms wrap around him. Rumi flinched; his instinct was to push the stranger away. But Shams held on, squeezing him tighter.

“Love me!” he whispered fiercely.

Rumi was shocked. He tried to jump up, but Shams’s embrace pressed him down in his chair.

“There’s no escape,” Shams whispered. “You will never go beyond time. You will never touch the hem of God, which is outside the universe. There is only one choice to make. Love me!”

Rumi had never known such panic as he felt at that moment. The darkness was suffocating. He had an overwhelming urge to cry out to Muhammad, the old servant who slept across the threshold of the house at night to protect it from burglars. Something in him, however, was not panicking. This surprised Rumi; it was enough for him to hold still in Shams’s grip.

“Better,” Shams murmured. His grasp loosened.

“Really?” Rumi laughed nervously. He heard his heart beating wildly and was sure that Shams heard it too.

Now Shams's arms relaxed; they were still wrapped around Rumi, but loosely, the way a father might hold his son as they sat by the river in springtime enjoying the return of warmth. In a low voice Shams began to sing.

Take me to that place where no one can go,
Where death is afraid
And swans alight to play
On the overflowing lake of love.

His singing voice was sweeter than his speaking voice, which carried an edge. Rumi kept still. He loved poetry, and even more he loved to hear it sung, with a reed flute playing somewhere in the distance. He felt a warm tear roll down his cheek.

Shams took a breath and repeated the refrain.

And swans alight to play
On the overflowing lake of love.
There the faithful gather
Ever true to their Lord.

Rumi shivered and was glad that the room was dark, because tears covered his cheeks. An assassin had entered his house and turned into an angel.

The shock of what had happened to Rumi quickly spread through the town. Konya's learned jurist had lost his way. He wandered the streets at all hours, wide-eyed, holding his hands up to heaven. He seemed delirious and fevered. He sang in a loud voice, and when people addressed him, he acted as if he didn't recognize them. This might have been forgiven, attributed to the full moon, even if some of his friends whispered darkly behind his back. Rumi was so respected that his reputation wasn't ruined in a week. It took a whole month.

“Our students are leaving. We’ll be ruined!” his wife wailed. Rumi gazed at her blankly, as if he didn’t know her either.

It was obvious that this distressing change had occurred after Shams arrived. People accosted him.

“You don’t like who he has become?” Shams replied.

“You do? He’s lost his mind. Soon he will lose all his friends. Nobody will have anything to do with him,” people said.

Shams shrugged. “Sometimes a person decides to become real. If you are shocked, think how he must feel.”

No one was satisfied with this cavalier explanation. Resentment against Shams grew, but Rumi rarely left his side. If Shams was in the room, he stared at him constantly, and the simplest sentence that Shams spoke caused Rumi to exclaim “Ah!” in a loud voice.

There were intervals when Rumi calmed down and could be questioned. Piecing together his words, which were rushed and fragmentary even during these calmer moments, his friends gathered what was going on with him.

“I didn’t know who I was,” Rumi explained. “I clothed myself in false knowledge, not just about myself but about everything. Why are we here? To find the truth. All my life I’ve prayed and studied. My father was a Sufi, believing that God is drawing us near. He taught me that my soul wants to join God, not after I die, but now, at this very moment.”

So far, none of this was a secret. The Sufis were a sect with great influence. The common people respected them because they wandered harmlessly seeking God. They were gentle; they took their search seriously. Shams was also a Sufi, from a different sect, but, then, there were many of these, and each had its own *tariqa*, its methods and rituals for finding God. But that was no reason to lose your mind, said Rumi’s friends.

Rumi's eyes would widen and his face glow with the innocence of a child. "I know, I know. But who ever finds God? The search is never-ending. If I counted up the words in all my prayers, there would be millions. I had to run away. So do you. Everyone must run away. It's our only hope."

He would become quite worked up at this point and lapse into a kind of whirling dance while singing songs that came into his head, passionate songs that most people found outrageous.

Death killed the one I was,
Now I am love itself!
If there is wheat around my grave
O, make your wine from it
And drink the elixir of life!

Strangely, the more that Rumi made a fool of himself, the more that people began to listen to him. They followed him in his wanderings, waiting to hear what might burst out of him. Then small clumps began to gather at his door. He had lost his respectability—no, he had thrown it into the gutter with a wild laugh—and in that moment God touched him. Always he sang about love and what lay beyond this world.

Don't come to my grave to weep.
I have left there,
I do not sleep,
I have joined the deathless dance of lovers,
And how my spirit flies!

If they listened, people gradually understood. Love was something new in their ears. The holy books spoke much more of fearing Allah, who holds eternal punishment over the heads of sinners. The faithful dreamed of the garden of Paradise promised by the Prophet, where wine flowed like a river and fruit fell from the trees, yet sin was inescapable. Children were

warned to obey without question, because next to faith God most loves obedience.

Deep down, though, they knew what Rumi was about. If you give a poor man an acre of land around his house, he will be pleased and stay there for life. Build a wall around that acre, however, and all he will want is to escape. Rumi had gone over the wall, and although people held their breath, waiting for him to be struck down, nothing happened. Months passed, and he still sang his delirious songs, attracting anyone who heard the soft call of the soul to be free.

Eventually Rumi noticed that he wasn't alone. Every day his doorway was blocked by a small crowd sitting on the ground waiting for him to emerge. Someone started to write down his words. Even when he was swinging around a post, reciting for hours in a trance, teachings came out. Risking heresy, some began to claim in private that he was reciting the Quran of the Persians.

Nothing stays private long. The clerics of Konya were greatly disturbed. They formed a delegation and came calling. Rumi received them meekly. Gazing around, his guests were surprised that his library was neat and undisturbed. Rumi knew what they were thinking.

“I didn't burn my books. Why should I? Allah cannot be touched by fire. But then, I would probably have to write them all over again.”

He spoke lightly, but the head cleric in Konya, a mullah who was twice as old as Rumi, glared at him suspiciously. “You would defile the holy books, except that it's inconvenient? Is that what you are saying?”

“I am saying whatever you hear,” murmured Rumi.

An argument would have broken out, but the clerics were silenced by Shams walking into the room.

“A convention of insect collectors,” he said in greeting, which no one understood. The sight of him was unpleasant enough.

“You have corrupted our best teacher,” the head cleric accused.

“I’ve liberated him,” said Shams. “Now he will be a perfect teacher.”

“Only the Prophet is perfect, peace be upon him,” chimed in another cleric.

“Every soul is perfect, but it shines through us as if through a dirty window. Who knows how we would be once the window is cleaned?” said Shams, as impudent as you please.

He had eaten well and was picking his teeth with a brass toothpick. The clerics rustled angrily. They weren’t there to debate, only to issue a warning. A vague warning, as it turned out, since none had the power to exclude Rumi from worship. If they kept him out of the mosque, he could pray privately. If they banned children from his madrassa, there would be trouble among the common people, who had begun to love him. Rumi had flung the school doors open to the whole town.

The clerics rose to leave when Shams held up his hand.

“I wagered my head to find this man who outrages you. You wince when he gazes at me with love, refusing to accept that one soul is seeing another. God willing, we will all see each other that way one day.”

“God willing, that day will never come,” snapped the head cleric, who had enough proof that Satan lies in wait for the unwary.

The scandal didn’t evaporate; neither did Shams. His presence was intolerable to anyone who mattered. One cold winter evening Rumi and his mystical friend sat talking. A servant came in, saying that someone at the back door wanted Shams. He still did his weaving. A customer, perhaps?

Shams gestured that he would be right back. He went to the back door. He never returned. Captors may have thrown a black sack over his head and spirited him off into the night. A whim may have taken hold, and Shams simply walked away

on his own. The rumor mill, seeing a satisfied look on the face of Rumi's younger son, held that he had organized an assassination. If so, Allah had exacted the price of Shams's head.

Rumi refused to believe the rumors. He was too shocked to eat or sleep, almost to breathe. When grief no longer paralyzed him, he packed a horse, took two servants, and searched for Shams everywhere he might be, as far away as Damascus. No trace was ever found.

When he wended his way home, Rumi reflected for a long time. "I know what has happened," he finally announced.

"That's good. You can live with your loss," people said.

"Never."

What grief had taught him was this: to ache for Shams was the same as aching for God. Rumi poured his ache into poems about Shams. First there were hundreds of these, then thousands, then tens of thousands. Yearning became his obsession. Then one day, after another spring had come, Rumi was wandering in his orchards, lost in himself. He felt a light touch on his shoulder.

"Shams!"

But when he turned around, it was just the petals of the plum trees, the first to bloom in April, that had touched him. As his fingers brushed them away, Rumi stopped. How can a person feel the touch of flower petals through thick wool clothing? Suddenly he heard Shams laughing, and his words came back.

"God disappears all the time."

So that was it. This longing for Shams was the same longing we have for a God who disappears, not because he hates us, but because all of life is a search—for love, for truth, for beauty. Whatever God stands for must be elusive; otherwise, we would all feast like a lazy rich man and fall asleep from excess and dullness.

Rumi stooped and gathered a handful of white plum petals, raising them to his nose. The scent was faint—some people smell nothing and wait for the cherry trees a month later—but to Rumi it was intoxicating. From that moment on, his search for perfect love was tinged with joy, even though seeking would never end.

Hearing his poems, people were astonished; there was so much love in Rumi's words and so much pain. Some couldn't bear to listen. When they shuddered, they knew it wasn't just for him. They felt afraid for themselves. They felt unrequited passion. They felt a voice that beckoned from eternity.

Motes of dust dancing in the light—

That's our dance too.

We don't listen inside to hear the music—

No matter.

The dance goes on, and in the joy of the sun

Is hiding a God.

Revealing the Vision

If the West was troubled by making the personal God disappear, as Buddha and many sages in India had done, Rumi brought him back with a passion. In his fervor, his thirst to make God his lover, his willingness to take his search to the edge of madness, Rumi is the complete devotee. Worship becomes all-consuming. Every moment is spent in a feverish search for one thing: the bliss that comes from ecstatic union with God.

From a romantic viewpoint, this sounds marvelous, but there was a stern necessity behind it. Like Judaism, Islam follows scriptures that are about law, obedience, the peril of temptation, and fear of the Lord. Can human nature sustain such an austere, disciplined relationship to God? Perhaps, for the few. But human nature has a great talent that is the reverse of its greatest weakness. If told not to stray beyond the safe

confines of virtue, we always find a way to transgress—jumping over the fence is our way to freedom and also to disaster.

Rumi knew both extremes. His biography, about a respected jurist who overnight became a free spirit, appeals to our modern taste for rebels. But his time with his beloved master, the mysterious wandering Sufi Shams-i Tabrizi, was brief, a matter of less than a year. During that time Rumi became versed in the ecstatic way, the path of increasing bliss through love of the divine. But there was a fateful side to Shams, who seems to have known that the path, for him, would end violently. He disappears from the pages of history by walking out a back door to meet an unnamed someone. After that, nothing is known, except that Rumi's grief was unbearable.

When grief is this intense, it's common for people to find surrogates to fill the void they feel inside. Parents who lose a child will preserve the child's bedroom intact, moving nothing, as if love can be frozen in time. At least remembrance can. Rumi did something like this in poems. He turned Shams into an immortal beloved, not for erotic reasons, but to regain the sense of perfect bliss that had descended upon him without warning, only to be lost just as unexpectedly.

In many of Rumi's poems you cannot tell God, the immortal beloved, and the lost teacher apart. Yet the way he writes about the search for God is so personal and passionate that it is irresistible:

In love that is new—there must you die,
Where the path begins on the other side.
Melt into the sky and break free
From the prison whose walls you must smash.
Greet the hue of day
Out of a fog of darkness.
Now's the time!

Outside the isolated sphere of Persian poetry, Rumi is known in translation for short verses and pithy sayings:

The idol of yourself is the mother of all idols.

Fortunate is he who does not walk with envy as his companion.

You're misled if you think the self is easy to subdue.

These make it seem that he is an effusive romantic, inspired to deliver brilliant gems that are easy to assimilate. But within his own tradition, Rumi is celebrated for monumentally long discourses on the Sufi way. The term *sufi* originated with the coarse wool cloak that wandering mystics wore, and to this day their practices are outside the rigorous boundaries of the Quran. It's a historical oddity that so many Westerners see the Sufis as appealing representatives of Islam, when to insiders they may be too unorthodox, too outside the Book. When Turkey became a republic under Mustafa Kamal Atatürk, after a three-year struggle for independence (1919–22), Sufism was outlawed along with other public displays of Islam. For a time Rumi's tomb in Konya was closed to the public, and it was decades before the whirling dervish dances that are central to the Mevlevi order were allowed to be performed. Whatever we think of Sufism, the various orders posed a threat to the secular state and reactionary belief.

When you are caught up reading the poems, none of that matters. The pure, undistracted path of the mystical lover of God is laid bare, along with its pain when the divine lover is absent. Of course, when you aren't under its spell, this kind of God-talk can seem histrionic, even hysterical. In the India of my childhood, there were respected, even revered, holy figures who acted—and perhaps were—insane; they were known as *mastram*, those who are mad for God. So Rumi's line, "You give away everything, even your mind," isn't poetic exaggeration. It is perilous to start out on a journey that could cost you your sanity, not to mention home, family, and social acceptance.

But it's a mistake, I think, to assume that the devotional path laid out by Rumi is a kind of spiritual bargain in which you trade reason for unreason, safety for risk, and ordinary happiness for bliss. The devotional path, like all profound paths, is about transformation, not bargains with an unseen God. The goal is still unity consciousness. However, instead of examining the obstacles that exist in our consciousness, which is the path of contemplation, or sorting out the real from the unreal by intellectual focus, which is the path of knowledge, devotion is an all-consuming love affair.

The romance of such a path quickly disappears, because no matter what path you take, obstacles and resistance block the way. Someone on the path of knowledge may be totally frustrated, saying, "I don't know where I'm going. My mind feels jumbled and confused. I'm exhausted thinking about God and never finding him." The devotee's frustration is emotional: "I feel numb. I can't find the bliss I once knew. God runs ahead of me like a teasing lover, never allowing me to touch him when I desperately want to." What saves both paths is that the course of the unfolding of the soul is well mapped. You may feel exhausted and empty, and in your struggle the condition feels unique. It isn't. The tradition of seekers is the longest in recorded history. For as long as we have records about God, we find seekers working their way to the divine presence.

Reading Rumi feels so persuasive because he reports everything from his own experience, no matter how humiliating. But he has a universal dimension that amplifies the personal, making it far more significant. Here he is in detached mood, speaking as if from an otherworldly perspective, a perch in eternity:

When a lover of God gets ready to dance

The earth draws back and the sky trembles

Because his feet could stomp with such wild joy

That the sun, moon, and stars might fall from heaven.

Reading about how the poems were written, one gets the impression that Rumi was always in a trance, sometimes dancing, sometimes swinging in circles from a pole. The sight of him doing those things riveted his followers and bothered respectable society. Yet the word *ecstasy* comes from the Latin meaning “to stand outside or apart.” Bliss isn’t a hysterical, moody, changeable state. Rather, it is an attribute of God and therefore completely stable. What causes the apparent hysteria and moodiness of Rumi’s situation is loss. Feeling no bliss, running after an absent God, desperate not to be abandoned, a seeker on the devotional path isn’t acting out ecstasy, but the opposite.

Which is why, I think, the respectable devotional paths found in the West, such as you’d meet in silent convents and peaceful churches, would be foreign to Rumi. Sufism is highly organized and disciplined, so we outsiders cannot speak credibly about the kind of experiences anyone has in the order. One suspects that Rumi’s kind of spontaneous awakening is rare, however. He doesn’t teach a path to us Western readers. Yet as a torch held aloft at the beginning of the path, who is more inspired? There is a bright flame inside Rumi, and his hope is that he makes you see the same flame inside yourself.

I’ll end with one of his most famous extended metaphors about the transformation that devotion may finally bring. A pair of lovers wake up in bed, and the woman—we imagine her tousled hair and intimate warmth—nestles into the man and asks him a question that feels vain:

In the earliest dawn two lovers awoke
And sipping some water she said,
“Who do you love more,
Me or yourself?”
She wanted the truth.

The man gives her an answer that isn’t kind to her vanity, yet speaks from the heart:

So he replied, “I can’t love myself,

I don't exist anymore.
I'm like a ruby held up to the sun
Melting into one redness.
Can you tell the gem from the world
When a ruby gives itself to sunlight?"

Then Rumi enters to speak in his own voice, taking the man's place and raising a lovers' chat into the sublime:

That's how holy ones can truthfully say

I am God.

So be a ruby at dawn
And hold to your practice.
Keep up the work, digging your well
Until you strike water.
Hang a ruby in your ear
And it will become the sun.
Keep knocking at the door
And joy will look out the window
To let you in.

If the West wants an antidote to the East's habit of making God disappear, Rumi doesn't fit the bill. He offers a personal God who is approached with love and devotion, but the path of devotion makes the seeker disappear. The light that embraces him extinguishes personality. It even extinguishes the lesser love between two lovers. In the evolution of God, holding on to the image of a patriarch sitting above the clouds becomes more and more a stubborn habit. This is especially so when, as with Rumi, the divine is a feeling in the heart that expands into all-consuming bliss. Bliss has no name or face. The world's visionaries go in a different direction. Their paths mingle, but still no single picture of God emerges. A deeper transformation is taking place.

6

Julian of Norwich

“All Shall Be Well”

Heads turned when Mistress Kempe rode through town. You couldn't miss her scandalous white dress—she called it her “pompous array”—which properly belonged on a virgin. Mistress Kempe had borne fourteen children, the first of which drove her insane for a time. (She was lucky to recover from her distraction, if recover she did.) Now she wouldn't let her husband touch her anymore.

“You'll enjoy pleasure enough when you arrive in heaven, John Kempe,” she told him tartly. He wasn't so sure it was a fair trade.

There was also talk about her crying in public, with big blobby tears and wailing for Jesus. You never knew when it would happen. Mistress Kempe said it came from the unbearable ecstasy of beholding God's works all around her. Was a haywagon crossing her path or an old donkey one of God's marvels? Perhaps, but the crying was so loud and strange (something between a screech owl and a squealing piglet) that it unnerved people.

“God has made me what I am, and I won't apologize for him,” she replied to all complaints.

A rich retinue followed her everywhere, even when she went to buy a sack of turnips. Any new queerness to be spotted in Margery Kempe was a popular topic.

She put on a show of enjoying the attention. “Jesus is the one who speaks to me, every day. That's all I need or want. The rest is like dust on my slipper.”

“Is he speaking to you right now?” people would ask, making her laugh.

“How could he? I’m the one talking right now. Are you deaf?”

She was actually worried about her holy outbursts, but in public she was brazen, as befits the daughter of a five-time mayor of Bishop’s Lynn. As a member of Parliament, too, he was regularly called down to London, especially during troubled times.

“What times would those be?” asked the wags in the local taverns. “The plague, the war in France, the new taxes that have starved half the peasantry, or the rebellions that killed off the rest?”

If Margery’s visions came from anywhere, they came from the feeling that the end of days might be near. By God’s mercy, the whole of England saw nothing but woe even before the boy-king, Richard II, proved to be a weakling, grossly deceived by his corrupt ministers.

In a land that prayed three times a day and attended church twice on Sunday, how much more did God want? The worst troubles had come in 1381 when Margery was eight. In one year the poll tax tripled, the lion’s share going to finance endless foreign wars and the rest lining the pockets of corrupt courtiers. A tax collector was attacked by an enraged mob south of London. It was a spark, and the peasants were dry tinder. Mobs assembled without warning. They marched in from the country, moving over the land like a raging monster. Pitched battles arose. A summer of violence cost the archbishop of Canterbury his life, and he wasn’t alone. The peasant army even faced down the king and demanded their freedom from serfdom. Who could believe it?

Soon the rebels started marching north. If they entered a town, they sought out tax collectors for rough justice, burned down the best houses, and defiled God’s places. The panic was akin to the panic that greeted the Black Death. Margery was only eight, pampered and innocent. She was packed up in the night and whisked away from their town, Bishop’s Lynn. She was frightened by being wrapped up in a thick wool blanket

and half suffocated in the bouncing coach. She never laid eyes on the rioting serfs. She barely knew any to begin with, being a city girl with a rich father.

But worse didn't come to worst. Before that summer was over the peasants were routed. They were armed with sticks and knives, no match for arrows, lances, and armor. Everyone ran to the center of Bishop's Lynn to see the most notorious leaders hanged, drawn, and quartered. Margery was torn between curiosity and fear. She couldn't resist, however, and decided to slip a groat into her maid's hand to sneak off to the executions. It would be gruesome, no doubt, but she wanted to see something special.

"My child, what could you dare to see?" her horrified maid asked.

"Just before they tear the body apart," said Margery soberly. "I hear that the hangman cuts out the man's heart and shows it to him so that he can repent and find God's mercy. That's something I'd like to see for myself."

Her maid balked, and in the end she got the groat anyway for promising not to tell Margery's father about such a wicked desire. Looking back, Mistress Kempe didn't consider it wicked, but God must have disagreed. A stony repentance would take up her whole life.

The first crisis came when she was twenty, still a bride and the mother of her first baby. The delivery was difficult. Margery became feverish, and soon she fell gravely ill. No herbs or prayers could break the fever. Her body was wracked with pain. It was so severe that she became delusional; she saw demons swirling around her, clawing at her with shrieks and laughter. Darkness blotted her mind, and when her husband came into the room, Margery turned her face away.

"No visitor can do me good now except death," she said.

Hope was defeated. A priest entered the house for her final confession. He was hesitant, though. "I will hear your confession, daughter," he told Margery, "but let's also pray for

your recovery. I will remain as long as God needs me.” This was more than optimism and certainly not charity. Her family could afford to pay a sizable piece of silver for a constant vigil.

“No, I must die after what I will tell you,” said Margery weakly. “God will have none of me then.”

The priest had heard every possible sin in the confessional. He reassured her that she could be forgiven, no matter what.

“Don’t say that until you hear my great secret,” Margery replied.

No one found out what she whispered in his ear, but the priest rushed from the room, horrified. He refused to give absolution. He wouldn’t even finish the confession. John Kempe watched in bewilderment as the priest fled the house. When he entered his wife’s room, she was raving, her eyes rolled back. He had no choice but to clap her up in the storeroom until the demons that tormented her mind finally claimed her life.

Months passed, and Margery woke up shaking every day, certain of her damnation. She wasted away as she pined. Since everyone accepted the same truth—her soul was lost to Satan—there was no reason to take extreme measures to keep her alive. So it was a little upsetting when the family entered the storeroom, ready to wrap a corpse in a winding sheet, only to find her sitting up and claiming that Jesus had appeared to her.

It was a miraculous visitation. Jesus stood by her bed, looking down at her with melting eyes. “Why have you forsaken me, and forsaken even yourself?” he asked.

“I did forsake him,” she admitted. “But no more. He stretched out his hand, and what was damned in me is now blessed. The rest of my life belongs to God alone.”

Her family was perplexed and skeptical. Margery wandered around for days in a kind of ecstasy—the loud, strange crying started then. No one could deny that she had miraculously regained her strength; and her speech, when she

could draw breath to make sense, was sane. But having her around posed problems. A young wife beset with an abundance of religious feeling should do the right thing and enter a convent; that had happened often enough. The family got Margery into the cloister, almost. The day came when her solitary bag was packed with the bare necessities for travel. She was found sitting on the floor, surrounded by her many fine dresses, weeping into a rich brocaded handkerchief. She waved it at her family.

“My beautiful things. I can’t leave them behind.”

And she didn’t. The wagon was sent away, and Margery resumed her pompous array.

She wasn’t proud of being proud. She just knew that a nun’s life would be too barren. Life with John Kempe was far from barren, one baby following hard on another, until he died suddenly after she bore him his fourteenth offspring. The rich widow started dressing herself in white and amplified the scandal by insisting that Jesus was coming to her again, quite often as it turns out. She could be seen every day around Bishop’s Lynn silently moving her lips, and everyone knew who she must be talking to. Everyone who believed her, that is.

Did she believe it herself? That was a vexing question. She had no way of proving that her visitations were divine. They could be demonic; she had had one experience of demons already. The only way to settle her dilemma was to find someone who spoke to God without a trace of doubt. A saint would be convenient. Second best was the blessed old lady who lived on the other side of the forest.

Providence bestows all things. When it came to the city of Norwich, Providence bestowed three things: wood, churches, and dead bodies. The blessed old lady, called Julian, was a witness to all of them. The supply of lumber that made the town rich seemed endless. Only the plague years stopped the carts trundling in long lines from the forest (carts that came in

handy for stacking up corpses like cordwood during plague time). English oak was famous everywhere, so the streets of Norwich were full of foreigners who had sailed from strange places to buy wood. When Margery Kempe came to town, she took notice.

“It was like Babel. I heard a Dane, a Russian, and a Spaniard on my way here,” she remarked.

“You speak those tongues?” asked Julian.

“No, but I travel. God’s body is scattered everywhere. I follow the pieces. Last week I was holding the skull of John the Baptist. Quite marvelous.” It was a peculiar way of saying that the Widow Kempe had enough gold to go on holy pilgrimages for most of the year, anywhere in Europe she hoped to find peace—and answers.

“Where is the skull of John the Baptist?” Julian asked.

“Here and there, it seems. France, Germany. I’ve seen several, sometimes just the jaw. It was set in gold in the middle of a great salver on the high altar.”

The blessed old lady wasn’t a relic yet. She was a recluse, dwelling in a bare hut beyond the edge of town. There was a jug of elderflower wine on the table that stood between them. Widow Kempe poured half a cup for herself and diluted it with water.

“Call me Margery,” she said, sipping her wine.

Everyone knew Julian’s name, although her birth name somehow had been forgotten during the long years when almost no one saw her except for the serving maids, and they came and went. People got used to seeing a silent devotee kneeling in the dimmest corner of the church of St. Julian, and that turned into the name they gave her, Dame Julian.

“So the wood trade has paid for all these churches,” Margery said. “I wonder if anyone can fill them.”

She knew about Norwich and the boons of Providence. Norwich boasted that it had more churches than any city in

Europe north of the Alps. “And the churches collect money to keep the dead bodies away.”

Julian frowned. “The last time the plague came was twenty-five years before you were born. I was only six, but I remember. Everyone does, if they survived.”

Looking back, Julian was happy that she hadn’t been older. Older people still woke up with nightmares about the plague. Margery had never personally seen the Black Death, only heard gruesome tales. A town’s populace could be mown down as if by one sweep of the scythe. Those who rushed to bury the dead would often be buried the next day. The stench of littered corpses made strong men faint. Most of these stories were kept alive from the pulpit when priests warned about God’s wrath. Nothing worked quite as well as a plague to squeeze tithes from the poor.

“Does my white dress offend you?” Margery asked. She was reluctant to speak about her real purpose for visiting. “Our reverend bishop hates it. More than our bishop, actually. All the ones I’ve met so far.”

“Do you meet many bishops?” Julian asked.

“I’m forced to.”

Which was a terse way of saying that Margery had been put to tests of faith many times, as you’d expect when someone makes a public spectacle of piety. None of her stern examiners, however, ever caught Margery in heresy. None ever said her visions were real either.

“They haven’t led me to the stake or noose, not yet,” she boasted.

In truth her worries had turned to anxiety and now to dread. Her pilgrimages had become more frequent, because Margery was fleeing. She had enough riches to pay off a priest who might condemn her. No mobs had forced her to escape imprisonment. But it was herself she was trying to flee. In dreams the demons were clawing at her again, just as before. Only now it took days and much wailing to get Jesus to appear

to her. The trail was exhausting and lonely. No one supported her holiness anymore, no matter how much gold she offered.

Julian was a last refuge. She was revered without being feared. The poor had no qualms about calling her a saint, and superstition swirled around her. Her existence was meager and stubborn. She wore plain brown homespun clothes and ate only enough to sustain two medium-size stewing fowls. Her spirit was as untouchable as a unicorn or phoenix. She spent hours praying, and the only time guests were allowed was when God told her to open her door. So that grubby coins wouldn't touch her, someone accepted alms before you went inside the dark chamber where Julian sat.

Or more likely knelt. Julian hated surrendering a moment to anyone but God. Praying made her glow, even though she rarely saw the light of day.

Margery was sure the old lady knew her purpose for being there, so she decided to get in the first word. "I've come to find certainty about my visions," she said after a moment's silence. "How can I tell?"

"If the bishops don't know, how can I? They are in authority over poor souls like us," said Julian, who had suffered through her own examinations when she was young. These were stern and harsh. If you failed, you sometimes didn't leave the room again.

"The bishops are protecting themselves," said Margery.

"Then perhaps you should ask Christ the next time he talks to you."

Margery laughed. She could tell that she wasn't being mocked. She was being understood, and this made her relax.

Suddenly Julian seemed to notice the white dress. "You aren't a virgin?" she asked.

"No. I wear white because I want to be pure again. "

"It's surprisingly hard to become a virgin again," Julian mused.

“I meant my soul.”

“So did I.”

Julian gave her an enigmatic look. “God speaks to you, and you want my advice? That could get both of us in trouble. What kind of answer would satisfy you?”

“An answer I can believe in. Sin has weighed down my life. I admit it. Half my fortune has been spent trying to remove the spots from my blackened soul.”

“My dear, you know the answers you were taught. When Our Lord rises again, all the dead will return. Then and only then will we be perfectly pure.”

Margery twisted her mouth. “I’m not one for waiting.”

“You won’t be waiting. You’ll be dead.”

Julian saw the look of disappointment on her guest’s face. What was she expected to say? Behind her worldliness, Widow Kempe was suffering. Julian drew a deep breath. “Our task is to believe in the teachings of the Church, not to create new ones. All new ideas have the same thing in common. They are heresies.”

Margery replied, “But what if the true teachings are kept from us? I mean deliberately, by the very ones who are supposed to tend our souls?”

She was stepping on dangerous ground now, and she expected Julian, like everyone else who feared the Church, to choose her words carefully. But she didn’t.

Julian’s voice grew sharp. “God doesn’t have to speak through priests. A cracked jug can carry only a little water.”

“Sometimes none,” Margery added.

“Sometimes none.”

A passing cloud turned the room dark as it blocked the sunlight coming through the one window in the hut. The two women couldn’t help but notice, and if they were the kind to

read omens, this might have been a sign from above—and not a good sign either.

Yet the veil of darkness seemed to draw them together. Margery heard a small clicking sound, which she knew well. The whole time they were chatting, Julian had been saying the rosary, her flicking fingers hidden under a lap shawl.

“Priests believe that everyone is about to tumble into hell,” said the old lady calmly. “That’s what frightens you. You might be in peril of damnation, if you listen to them. I don’t believe it. Is it possible that God should love his children and yet see them damned?”

A sense of relief swept over Margery. “So there’s a way out?”

Julian’s eyes were small shining dots in the darkness. “Of course.” She paused to gather her words while never ceasing the quiet click of her rosary beads.

“I’m going to tell you the absolute truth. As with most things absolute, you won’t believe me.”

“Go on.”

“Close your eyes and listen. These are not just words to reassure you. They will be your salvation.”

The power in Julian’s voice made Margery feel comforted and uneasy at the same time, a strange mixture. She closed her eyes. The tiny window in the hut afforded no light. She saw only blackness, and she waited. A gift from a saint might be at hand.

What makes a saint? The world speaks in a way the rest of us cannot hear. Normal life deserts them. If Julian’s life was shaken by the plague when she was a girl, Margery’s was undermined by the peasant rebellion. God works on the soul in mysterious ways. Margery never got to see the hangman hold a villain’s heart before his eyes so that he might repent. But she passed burned-out skeletons of houses in town, with black

holes where windows should be. Every time her maid passed the fresh graves of victims murdered by the mob, the same warning was repeated. “That could have been your father.” Close friends of his—merchants, magistrates, landowners—disappeared overnight.

Fear colored Margery’s memories, but so did other feelings, all sinful. Hatred of priests inflamed the peasants, and hatred is slow to die. When the rebels confronted King Richard, their leaders complained bitterly about priests who owned vast lands and paid for their own private armies. The clergy were supposed to live in poverty and act like men of peace. What excuse did they have for outrageously flouting their vows?

These bitter questions didn’t get answered. There was no need once the rebel leaders had been executed. The mob scattered to the four winds, every man disclaiming in a loud voice that he had sympathized with the revolt. Miraculously, no one had ever been the king’s enemy.

Hatred stayed close to home, keeping quiet. One of the executed leaders, a renegade preacher named John Ball, was never forgotten. He’d had the courage to deliver sermons in the open air, like Our Lord himself. Crowds gathered on the commons of south London. Ball read out loud from an English Bible, which was close to treason, almost as bad as preaching about God under the open sky. As for the rich, high-born priests, Ball said a sentence that lingered long after he was killed by the crown’s henchmen. It was a cry for the common folk against the aristocracy: “When Adam dug and Eve spun, who were the gentlemen then?”

Those words reached Margery’s ears and burned into her conscience. She ran to her father, the mayor.

“Did God give Adam and Eve the whole earth to tend?” she asked.

Her father smiled. “Well, Adam.”

“And did Adam work the soil?”

Her father nodded.

“So it was God’s wish that whoever works the land should own it?” said Margery.

Her father reminded her with a frown that she was eight. Margery repeated the question.

“God’s first wish doesn’t matter now,” her father replied.

“He changed his mind?”

“Yes.”

“But if God is perfect, he’s always right. He wouldn’t need to change his mind.”

Her father frowned again. He didn’t think about demons, not that early on, but he was disturbed to have a child showing signs of stubbornness and peculiarity.

“Have no fear; God is perfect. He doesn’t need to explain himself to young girls.” One comfort to the mayor was that his daughter would never learn to read and write. There is no better protector of faith than ignorance.

Which put an end to it. But questions have a way of burying themselves in the ground, like seven-year locusts. When they emerge again, it surprises people that there are so many more than anyone ever remembered. Margery’s conscience gave her no peace, as much as she prayed. Her father owned several farms in the country. He assumed she enjoyed sitting beside him when he visited his lands, and sometimes when he drove the horses himself, he let her hold the reins.

Margery secretly began to fear these outings. The serfs lined the narrow dirt track that led from the farmhouse to the fields. The men tipped their caps, the women curtsied as if none of them had taken part in the mass rage against their owners. But they were owned as surely as slaves. None of them ever earned enough money to buy their own land, and most wore out their bodies before they were thirty.

Why had God made life so difficult for almost everyone, allowing comfort and ease for the few? Guilt crept its way into Margery's mind. She knew what the Bible said. After their disobedience Adam and Eve were punished sorely. God said,

Cursed are you above all livestock

and all wild animals!

You will crawl on your belly

and you will eat dust

all the days of your life. (Gen. 3:14)

Margery didn't see the rich eating dust. At her father's table they ate venison and goose, and on holidays they feasted on roast peacock decorated in its shining plumage, just like the king at Westminster. Being rich meant that God loved you better than anyone else; but then a horrible thought occurred to her. If God's love brings such comforts, he must hate almost everyone. On her rides to the farm Margery had seen old women so tired and bent over that they actually were eating dust as they planted the spring seed.

For years she kept her doubts to herself. They festered, and when she went through the agony of her first childbirth, she had to have the boil on her soul lanced. Her great secret must be told to the priest. Lying in pools of sweat in a room that sweltered with the shutters sealed, Margery felt the cool relief of absolution even before it was delivered, never suspecting the trap she had set for herself.

"I think God hates us. In fact, I'm sure of it," she said in the priest's ear. "My life hasn't been spent closed up in my father's house. I've seen witches burned for believing that they consorted with the Devil, and two confessed that they bore his child, which had a tail that had to be hidden in swaddling clothes. They drowned Satan's child, and for that alone they were damned."

"My child!" protested the priest, wanting her to stop while there was still time. If she kept going, forgiveness would vanish.

A wave of pain struck Margery, making her groan aloud. “No, I must.”

The priest waited nervously while she regained the strength to speak. Her skin was ashen, and he was as sure that she would die as Margery was.

“God must hate us to give us corrupt bishops who condemn the innocent just so they can seize another parcel of land for themselves. I’ve gone with midwives and seen babies born in squalor, looking like raw-skinned animals before they died a few hours later. God gives us no mercy. We sicken and grow old. We stew in our sins, knowing that divine punishment is certain while divine love never arrives.”

Now the priest was greatly alarmed. “You asked me for confession, but these words are proud and sinful.”

Ill and wan as she was, Margery turned her head toward him with burning eyes. “I don’t believe in you, priest, so you can’t frighten me,” she said. “Your salvation is as toothless as your punishments. Life here on earth is already hell enough.”

The priest felt a surge of outrage that swept away any compassion he had for the dying young mother. “God’s mercy will be to take you now. If you survive, you will know what it means to be charged with witchcraft and blasphemy.” He held his voice steady, despite his anger, wanting to present the stony face of authority.

Margery uttered a laugh that came out as a croak from her parched throat. “If you stand for God at this moment, prove it. Does Our Lord forgive me or hate me? I need a sign. If you can’t summon one, I might as well consult an ass about God as talk to you.”

This outrage is what sent the priest flying out of the room in a black humor. Margery looked back on the incident with a heart full of strangeness. Perhaps she spoke out of delirium. Perhaps her words were what drew the demons to dance around her bed, because within hours she saw them. Or did her blasphemy draw Jesus to her bedside? Was it necessary to

swear against God's mercy in order to make him hear her? The only thing she was certain about is that Jesus did come, and her heart was flooded with mercy when he said, "Why have you forsaken me, and even forsaken yourself?"

Her recovery and her visitation from Jesus became common knowledge. The priest who could have destroyed her decided not to. He wasn't showing mercy. The mistress he kept on the side talked him out of taking rash action that would provoke retaliation from Margery's powerful family. Better to let an uneasy peace prevail, and peace was always uneasy in the years following the revolt.

Devotion soothed Margery for a long time. Jesus reassured her of his mercy by telling her so every day, and when she went on her pilgrimages, she couldn't help but fall weeping at the foot of each and every holy relic.

"I feel that God is here before me," she said to the sacristan who had unveiled a piece of the holy shroud in Italy.

He smiled graciously, and Margery didn't notice that he was holding out his palm expectantly. But she knew a little Italian, and when her back was turned, she heard him mutter to a lackey, "*Stupida!* Did she pay at the door? Show me."

One cynical remark isn't enough to shatter faith. Margery's was worn away by slow degrees, the way pilgrims slowly wear down the steps of a cathedral. Her travels showed Margery unspeakable poverty, far worse than what she saw on her father's lands. The heads of prisoners were stuck on pikes lining London Bridge after the hangman was done with them. Margery couldn't help wondering how many had been guilty only of irritating the king's mistress when they refused to be her lover. A monarch can kill a few rivals on a whim; God killed everyone in the end. Was he indulging a whim?

Margery's faith was ravaged and torn by the time she came to Julian. When she was asked to close her eyes, she felt a soreness around her heart and realized that she was powerless to heal it. What could Julian do to relieve her pain?

Margery shivered as the old lady repeated her insistent words.

“I am not going to comfort you. I am going to give you the same salvation that God gave to me. *All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well,*” she murmured and stopped.

There was nothing more? Margery squeezed her eyes tight, awaiting a thunderclap or some other sign.

“Do you understand?” asked Julian, speaking in quite a normal voice.

Margery heard the clink of cups and then a splash. She opened her eyes and perceived, dim as the room was, that Julian was pouring more wine, this time for both of them. She was wreathed in smiles.

“Marvelous, isn’t it?” she said. “Oh, wait. I can see that you don’t understand. I’m so sorry.” The look of disappointment in Margery’s face was unmistakable. Instead of reproving her, Julian laughed. “What did you expect, dear woman? I can’t shoot lightning out of my breasts.”

“I expected—”

Margery stopped there and meekly accepted the cup of wine being held out to her.

Julian sat back in her chair. “I knew that your visions were genuine the moment you stepped in. You weep from ecstasy, even though it embarrasses you and makes you a spectacle. You spend your money on holy pilgrimages and give to charity. All of this speaks of your love for Jesus, and he comes to those who love him with a full heart. How can I not believe this? He came to me.”

This was the most that Julian had said since Margery arrived, and her frailty made it difficult. But she wanted to keep on. “I wasn’t concerned about your visions, but about your sin.”

Margery cringed. “You think I’m horrible.”

Julian tilted her head back and laughed. “My child, no one is horrible. Sin is not the sign of our evil. It is something no one imagines. I would not have imagined it if Our Lord had not told me himself.”

Margery couldn't speak. She had spent years fearing that she would be declared a danger to the Church. Now she was sitting politely over wine with someone who could shake the Church to its core, if the common people rallied around her visions. The doctrine of sin had kept them as oppressed as the king's soldiers. The room began to swim; Margery intended to say, “I don't understand.” Instead she said, “You are very dangerous.”

“So we are more alike than you think,” said Julian. “I was in my thirtieth year when I fell so sick that I was expected to die. My first instinct, however, wasn't to send for a priest.”

“Why not?”

“Because in my experience people die a little faster as soon as the priest comes,” Julian replied coolly. “It's common politeness. My case was different. God appeared to me every day, ending only when I was well again.”

“I've heard tales.”

“I know. It became the tattle. But you and I know how life overturns when God speaks.”

The old lady paused, but not from shyness or a desire to keep things to herself. She was overwhelmed, even now, forty years later, by the light that had streamed into her body then. She had left her sickroom, as if floating above the earth, and beheld the cosmos reduced to the size of a hazelnut. In that vision, seeing that all of creation could fit in the palm of her hand, she knew that God was in everything. If he was in everything, he must be in the sinner and his sin and even the Devil himself.

“I was amazed to see sin in a new way,” she said. “It is not our shame. Sin will become our worship.”

Margery, who thought she was long past being shocked, felt more than shocked at that moment. She almost panicked. “You cannot be praising sin,” she said weakly.

“I praise all of God’s creations. It can’t be that one part is perfect and the other part diseased. We are pained by knowing that we have sinned. That pain was given to us to show where we have lost love. If we listen to our own pain, we will find a way through to love once more. Sin is repaid by bliss.”

Julian took long enough to say these words that Margery could calm herself. She looked at her hands and noticed that she had emptied her cup of wine. She was beginning to understand, because her own pain had turned to ecstasy—not always, but more than a few times.

“Sin is in God’s plan,” said Julian. “We are led by every sign, by everything that happens to us, toward love. That is why all is well. That is why all shall be well. What I told you is absolute truth. Pain comes and goes. We sin today and forget tomorrow. What abides forever is love.”

Margery didn’t disguise that she was overwhelmed; she began to sob. There had always been a touch of humiliation when tears overcame her in public. Now she wept freely, and it felt as if grains of poison were being dissolved and washed from her heart.

“I was so afraid to lose my soul,” she murmured when she was able to form words.

“Too many people have told you that your soul was in danger. Before you believe anyone, ask if they have ever seen their own souls.”

It seemed to Julian that she had revealed enough. The effort exhausted her, and, besides, she was a realist. Half of Norwich had made its way to her door; most of them broke down crying when she spoke. But she didn’t observe that Norwich had turned into a gleaming city of saints.

Margery reached out in the darkness and took the old lady’s hand, even though it meant separating it from the

rosary. Julian drew it back.

She said, “Don’t think I’ve blessed you. You bless yourself. Your soul will never take rest in things that are beneath itself.”

My soul blesses me. Even when I sin? thought Margery, but she didn’t say it aloud. She could barely take in this new view of sin. The trip back to Bishop’s Lynn hadn’t become shorter while she sat there. She rose; the two of them exchanged nods. As she walked out into the coolness of late twilight, Margery had no thoughts. A silence lingered inside that calmed her. In the coach on the way home, she wrapped herself in a blanket and tried to sleep as it jounced along. She wanted to envision a world where all shall be well. It was difficult. To imagine that all is well already was impossible. After awhile Julian’s image seemed to fade away.

To outward appearances Margery Kempe kept wandering restlessly. There was a particularly holy relic in Danzig she had to see, a chalice that overflowed with Christ’s blood every Easter. But she was haunted by indelible words from Julian: “You will never be free until you see your own soul.” She found herself on an invisible pilgrimage. A woman in white might be seen anywhere as the years passed. When she was too old to travel, Margery became calmer, but for the day she died.

Witnesses recall that she became excited at the last. With a faint cry she reached out her hand, grasping feverishly for an object hovering over her bed. No one else saw it, however, and she passed away without a word. Whatever had aroused her spirit was between herself and God.

Revealing the Vision

Turning to a Christian mystic after looking at Eastern mystics feels more familiar. We are used to terms like “soul” rather than “Atman,” Jesus rather than Shiva. But behind this familiarity God is departing from the reassuring fatherly images of church sermons. Not everyone is in favor of the

divine disappearing act. The pull of old images is strong, and breaking away from them is wrenching. Violence can ensue. The romance of being in the world but not of it—which is the essential romance of mysticism—clashes with harsh social reality.

I can't help but feel that Julian of Norwich is the most touching figure in this book. She wasn't martyred; there is no evidence that she suffered any persecution. We have no record that she was lonely, even though she lived away from society in rural seclusion at a time when the deep forest crept to the edge of even sizable towns in England. What makes her so touching is the gaping distance between Julian's inner life and the brutality of life around her. It took a long time before scholars stopped calling her era the "Dark Ages" and adopted the more polite and clinical term the "Middle Ages." But how much darker could an age get?

The Black Death, which Julian witnessed early in her life, was a holy terror, literally. We can hardly imagine it—not just the shock of seeing corpses piling up in the streets, as up to a third of a town's population died in a matter of days, but also the terrifying conviction that God was indeed bringing down his wrath. Scapegoats were sought out and killed—witches, Jews, and heretics. Death's scythe swept with unstoppable savagery. Against this background, imagine a woman hearing this message from God: "*All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.*"

These words are the ones Julian is remembered for in the annals of Catholic mystics, a fair share of whom were women. But in England in the fourteenth century, Julian stands out in a ravaged landscape full of violence, disease, the Peasants' Revolt, and strong-handed clerics who sometimes supported their own private militia. Julian's only rival is Margery Kempe, who would not be remembered, since the Church didn't pick her up, except that she published a memoir, the first published book written by a woman in English.

They met when Julian was old and Margery middle-aged, and in imagining what they said to each other, I've raised the

central issue that hovers around mystics: Are their revelations real? Once you are canonized, made officially saintly, the matter is settled by the book. But for everyone in this book, with few exceptions, hearing from God led to an outcast's status and general suspicion. In Julian's time, every life was entangled, one way or another, with religion. This meant, without a doubt, that countless people claimed to be divinely inspired, just as countless local churches claimed to have precious relics like a piece of the True Cross or the spear that pierced Jesus's side.

It doesn't help if a mystic receives messages that disagree with the religious powers of the day. They often do, as if God chose the humblest to correct the errors of the mightiest. Here is a sample from Julian that couldn't have pleased the local bishop:

God showed that sin shall be no shame to man, but worship. For right as to every sin is answering a pain by truth, right so for every sin, to the same soul is given a bliss by love.

The language is archaic, but the import was shocking at the time: sin isn't something to be ashamed of. God is sending you pain to show you where the truth lies. Therefore, sin is ultimately a way to find bliss through divine love.

Do not be ashamed of sin? As everyone around her knew, sin was a universal condition. It linked every person to the fall of Adam and Eve. No less important, it created the durable mixture of fear and devotion that enabled the Church to amass vast wealth. Every cathedral is a monument to redemption and sin, tightly holding hands. Margery Kempe was tormented by not knowing where she fell in this bargain. Was she a sinner who must devote every penny to pilgrimages—she was incredibly well traveled for a woman, visiting the main sites throughout Europe—for fear that she was damned? In her mind, Margery seemed to feel this way, and we are told cryptically that, when she was very ill, she confessed such

dreadful things that her confessor ran from the room, refusing to absolve her or to tell anyone what she had said in his ear.

Or was Margery genuinely visited by God? There are doubting mystics, after all, and one imagines her trying to get Julian to clear away these doubts. Which she did, after a fashion. Unable to detect whether Margery's various visions, fits, sweats, and public exhibitions were really from God, Julian took a simpler course. She said that since Margery devoted herself to charity and other holy works, the outcome of her strange state, half ecstasy, half madness, was goodness in the end.

The fourteenth century is far away, but our existence has enough fears and threats that "All shall be well" needs explaining. To the modern mind, calling this an article of faith is hardly a defense. Nor is Julian saying that all shall be well when we die and arrive in heaven. What was revealed to her can best be described as a state of awareness that is much more expanded than ordinary waking awareness. Placed in that state spontaneously, Julian saw sin, evil, and suffering in an entirely new light:

Truth sees God, and wisdom beholds God, and of these two comes the third: that is, a holy marveling delight in God; which is love.

This new kind of seeing represents her experience of being united with a divine presence that transformed her. The actual visions lasted only a few days, but their effect was permanent (reminding us that people today who have near-death experiences report that, having "gone into the light," they return with no more fear of death).

Julian's new perspective revealed truths that by now will seem familiar to readers from earlier chapters:

In God's sight all men are one man, and one man is all men.

Suddenly is the soul united to God when it is truly at peace in itself.

We may never come to the full knowing of God till we know first clearly our own Soul.

There is no mistaking that some mystics bring warnings from God, but Julian isn't one of them. Her message is that God contains no wrath and that "we are His joy and His delight, and He is our salve and our life."

It was also made clear to her that awareness of God implies a journey from suffering to unity, again a common theme in this book. How is this journey undertaken? The ingredients are familiar and Christian. Julian advocates prayer and contemplation, and her chief mission is to reinforce faith in God's love. This can feel disappointing. After the rush that comes when reading the great mystics, readers can feel let down. "What about me?" is a natural question, and often there is no answer. Or rather, the same conventional answers are given over and over. In the East the advice shifts from prayer to meditation. Still, each seeker is left to walk the path alone.

I think it's healthy to turn disappointment on its head by realizing that inspiration isn't empty or momentary. In Julian and her like we have evidence of personal transformation. We witness the workings of a different state of awareness. Above all, the spiritual path acquires a human face. She is someone who had to figure out, as every seeker must, how to live in the world with such extraordinary knowledge.

The more cosmic Julian becomes, the more extraordinary her state seems. A famous passage in her text, *The Showing of Love*, begins with a tiny, everyday object:

He showed me a little thing, the quantity of a hazel nut,
lying in the palm of my hand, as it seemed. And it was
as round as any ball.

Being in a new state of awareness, Julian perceives that she's holding the earth in the palm of her hand, much like William Blake several centuries later seeing the world in a grain of sand. Blake also speaks of holding infinity in the palm of your hand. Julian uses the image to support her view of the divine:

I looked upon it with the eye of my understanding, and thought, “What may this be?” And it was answered generally thus, “It is all that is made.”

I marveled how it might last, for I thought it might suddenly have fallen to naught for littleness. And I was answered in my understanding: It lasts and ever shall, for God loves it. And so have all things their beginning by the love of God.

The way that Julian connects the humble and the universal has given her message its staying power. I doubt that anyone could read her experiences without feeling close to her. The three surviving manuscripts of her book have been printed, as I understand it, for meditation in convents. There is no doubt that it exists as a document of Catholic faith.

What inspires us today is a direct account of an ordinary person suddenly seeing with the eyes of the soul. Throughout the evolution of God, people yearn for transformation. Each religion is like a training program for dropping the shell of mortality in order to live in the gleaming sheath of immortality. When religions insist that only one training program works (and disbelievers will be punished as heretics if they say otherwise), immortality gets lost in dogma. But each mystic who attests to her or his transformation gives hope. Julian of Norwich found transformation in a setting of death and strife. But she is closer to us than Eastern mystics, and so her familiarity makes our own transformation seem more possible.

7

Giordano Bruno

“Everything Is Light”

The Church sent a larger-than-average gondola to pick up the prisoner in Venice. A twisted sign of respect? The glistening black hull was wide enough for four men. It was outfitted with chains to bind the prisoner’s chest and manacles for his feet. Dressed in a dirty brown shift, the short, erect man stood quietly on the lowest step of the quay, letting the waves of the Grand Canal wash over his bare toes. The guards assigned to him were watching from inside the prison, where they were keeping out of the cold. Two other men stepped out of the boat, a jailer with keys dangling from his belt and a young Dominican priest, who kept staring down nervously.

“Get in,” the jailer ordered roughly. “Don’t move until I have you chained in. We don’t need a fool jumping ship.”

Not looking at the jailer, the prisoner did as he was told. He focused his attention on the young Dominican.

“Your first?” he asked.

“I don’t know what you mean, brother,” said the young priest, who was having a hard time getting back into the boat as it swayed on the water. He wasn’t coastal born. This might have been the first boat he ever met with.

The prisoner faintly smiled. “I should have been more specific. Your first excommunication? Inquisition? Conspiracy against the innocent? And don’t call me brother. I’ve been defrocked several times, when it suited them.”

“This one’s a talker,” the jailer grumbled, nodding to the gondolier, who pushed away from the palazzo steps. The dawn sat on the horizon, blessing Venice the way wealth and beauty expect to be blessed. By now the prisoner was shackled and

bound. He sat in the middle seat of the black lacquered boat with its grandly carved prow.

As they glided past a row of waterside palazzos, no one noticed an onlooker wearing a nightcap who had appeared at an upper window of one palazzo, no one but Bruno, the condemned man they were carting to Rome. Tilting his head, he shouted with unexpected violence.

“I’ve been despised by bigger men than you! I’ve been despised by kings. Tomorrow I will be despised by the Pope. Traitor, coward!”

The man in the upper window scowled and backed away out of sight.

“Quiet down. Honest folk are sleeping. I don’t want to have to gag you,” warned the jailer.

“Honest folk are sweating between incestuous sheets, half of them,” said Bruno. He laughed to see the look on the priest’s face, then leaned forward confidentially. “That man who was staring down at us, he has no conscience. I was his friend, his teacher. But he condemned me to the bishop anyway, for spite. I woke up in his house one morning to see five ruffians storm the room. They thrust me into his garret before the officials came. He’ll go back to sleep now, and at noon he’ll pay for a special Mass. Just in case being a Judas irks God a little.”

The young Dominican had been forewarned about the prisoner’s silver tongue. He was determined not to respond, but it was a long row to the mainland where a prison cart awaited. The gondolier, who was fat and belched garlic fumes, pulled lazily on his oar. He was in no hurry.

“God is just. Perhaps you will find mercy,” said the priest, judging his words carefully. The jailer was in the employ of the papal see, and he had ears.

Bruno twisted his mouth. “Don’t give yourself away. Sympathy with a heretic is the same as being a heretic.”

“And are you a heretic, then? Do you hate God?”

“God?” Bruno eyed the young priest. “The last duke I served took an interest in me personally. He sat at my feet for months. Then he concluded that I had not a scrap of spirituality in me. I took it as a compliment, although the duke was shocked. He drove me away from court by night in a cloaked carriage and hoped never to set eyes on me again.”

Bruno paused. “You think me very confident for a condemned man.”

“Not condemned yet,” corrected the priest.

“As good as.”

The canal soothed the waves that rolled in from the Adriatic. If you judged the Church by the magnificent domes that rose around them, you’d think Venice was paradise. A better paradise than Eden, since this one was swathed in silk and gold.

Bruno fought the sway of the boat to sit bolt upright. “Can you smell the corruption? I was being tried by the bishop of Venice, but that wasn’t safe enough. Now Rome demands my body. We both know what they intend to do with it. Have you ever heard your own bones crack? Nasty. Pardon me, I realize that the clergy isn’t used to hearing the truth.”

The young priest wanted to retort that his whole life was devoted to the truth, but he shrank back. The prisoner’s rashness pushed at him like a fetid wind.

For the rest of the trip over the water, no one in the gondola spoke. They landed at a small stone quay that was deserted except for the prison wagon.

Before he could be hauled into it, Bruno jerked on his chains. The jailer’s attention was caught. The Dominican had already climbed up to a seat on top.

“I want to say good-bye,” Bruno said.

“Good-bye to who? There’s no one about.”

“If you’re blind.”

The prisoner enjoyed being an enigma, clearly. He knelt on the bare ground for a long moment, placing his cheek against the earth. He couldn't blame the earth for his troubles. Perhaps the times were to blame. The plague scoured his village when Bruno was a boy, under the shadow of Vesuvius near Naples. Turks raided the countryside and hauled away slaves. Your sister or daughter might disappear overnight. Crops withered, as if so much ill fortune deserved nothing less.

Despite any such curse, the real blame was in his nature. Giordano Bruno's soul was inflamed by anger, zeal, curiosity—many things—yet his insatiable appetite for fame is what goaded him into insanity. Insanity made him the most notorious heretic in Europe. Not a simple insanity either, like the visions that poor wretches had, screaming about Satan with a goat's head and fiery eyes. Bruno wanted to be the most notorious heretic in Europe. He wouldn't be satisfied until the Pope sent for him personally, and then what?

They would have a brilliant conversation. Bruno would rise up and dazzle the Holy Father with his arguments. What were his faults in the Church's eyes? He held that the earth moved around the sun. So did Copernicus, a Catholic, while Aristotle, a pagan, said no. Bruno had written other controversial things: that infinite stars shone in the sky, each one a planet with human life on it; that all things were made of God, not just by God; that in every man, even the grossest sinner, divine light is present.

These notions were not heresies. They were truths. They had their own divinity, if only you opened your mind. Bruno could already see the admiring look in the Pope's eyes as he unwound his defense. A torrent of eloquence climaxed gloriously as the Holy Father shrank into his ermine-trimmed robes like a frightened child, while Bruno, brandishing his fist, cried, "See? I have proven it beyond the shadow of a doubt. I am not the heretic, since I worship the truth. You are!"

He felt a kick in the ribs that wasn't soft. "Get up. You've kissed the mud long enough," the jailer growled.

Bruno's fantasy was reluctant to vanish. Staggering to his feet, the most notorious heretic in Europe fixed the jailer with icy arrogance.

"Take me to Rome, immediately. I have things to say."

The jailer, who was not just a clod, appreciated the act. He gave a mocking bow and opened the door to the prison wagon. Bruno stepped inside, ignoring the stench that filled the dank interior, which was lit by a single barred window on the door. There were no seats. He sat on the filthy straw-covered floor while the jailer chained him to two iron rings hanging from the side of the wagon.

"Apologies. We left Your Honor's satin cushion behind."

The door slammed shut, and soon the transport was bouncing on the hard stone road that led down to the water. The January chill pierced the cracks in the wagon boards, but he thought better in the cold. His manacles were mercifully loose, and except for the stench Bruno wasn't in any great discomfort. This was all a hopeful sign. The Church wanted him back. It wasn't going to subject him to such degraded suffering that he couldn't keep his mind intact.

Even better, he was not pursued by the demon of despair. Even at that moment, sitting in the filth on the wagon floor, Bruno appreciated being alone with his thoughts. They were his one consoler, as they had been since he ran away to become a monk at fifteen, almost thirty years before. *I am as safe as my thoughts*, he told himself.

The Inquisition in Venice had been going his way. He would have won, but one day the courtroom was vacated, and the accused was informed that his case had been transferred to Rome, by direct order. Even though the demon of despair never visited Bruno, it brushed him lightly when he heard the announcement. *Rome means death*. He quickly swept the fear from his mind. He would talk about the stars one more time. *Look at them. See what I see*. The revolving heavens would save him before the Church brought heaven crashing down on Bruno's head.

The journey to Rome took two days. The prisoner wasn't fed or let out of the wagon, even for the call of nature. He slept hanging from his chains. A weaker man would have doubted that the Church still cared for him. To Bruno, these privations proved the opposite. His mind was so feared by the authorities that the court wanted him to be fatigued. They would find him more compliant that way. This belief redoubled when the wagon had almost arrived at the destination. The wheels stopped with a lurch. The door was flung open, and in the brilliant sun of the south Bruno's eyes were dazzled.

He heard a horse stamping in the dust, then a shadow blocked out the sunlight. In jumped a stout man who made the wagon boards groan. Bruno blinked. The door slammed shut, and they were off again.

"Greetings." In the dimness Bruno recognized the black cassock and sash of a Jesuit. "I have the honor of escorting you the rest of the way, doctor. We'll have you out of these unfortunate bonds soon. Water?"

The Jesuit fumbled for a moment and then held a silver beaker to Bruno's lips. The prisoner drank from it, but not desperately. If he was being greeted with dignity, Bruno would keep his as well.

"Where are we going?" he asked when his mouth was moistened.

"To the *castello*. A room awaits."

"Ah."

Bruno was too weakened to summon more than a syllable. The *castello* meant that he was going to a most feared place, the Castel Sant'Angelo, a huge circular bulwark on the bank of the Tiber. It was built as the tomb of the emperor Hadrian centuries ago, but he wasn't the first man to enter and never emerge again. Certainly not once the Inquisition took over the castle as the place for torturing suspected heretics.

If the Jesuit relished the shudder he had produced, he never indicated it. He held the silver beaker to Bruno's lips until he had drunk it dry. Next he produced a folded napkin and undid it to reveal some good bread and cheese, which he fed to the prisoner with surprisingly gentle care.

"It's sad that such things should go on between educated men," said the Jesuit. "I would not use the word 'inquisition' in your presence, except that you realize, with your clarity of intellect, that it refers only to an inquiry. *Quaero, quaerere, quaesivi, quaesitum*. Latin is so much easier."

From another mouth this turn of pedantry would have amused Bruno, but he felt a chill.

"We have assembled some papers," the Jesuit went on. "Sign them, make a few modest statements before the Curia, and by nightfall we will share supper on the piazza. The whole unfortunate affair will be cleared up."

Bruno nodded without reply. None was expected, apparently. The wagon, the chains, and the stench of his own excrement spoke for themselves. Any escape route would be eagerly seized.

The dirt road turned to stone paving, then to round cobbles. The door was thrown open, and the jailer, after letting the Jesuit out (the priest had pressed a perfumed handkerchief to his nose by now), unlocked Bruno and bodily hauled him into the outside light, which was now growing toward dusk.

"A coin for your kindness," Bruno said. "My footman will pay you."

The joke produced a scowl from the jailer. The water and scrap of food had raised Bruno's spirits. The huge stone drum that loomed over him wasn't so frightening anymore. The castellated roof looked less like jagged fangs, the great iron doors less like a maw. Once inside, he was led to a well-lit room with a bed and chairs, not a cell. Moments later a servant in Vatican livery brought in a tray with steaming soup in a tureen.

The prisoner, if that is what he was, ate alone. Just before falling exhausted onto the bed, he was visited again by the solicitous Jesuit.

“Someone will bring you a suit of clothes in the morning. Throw the rags you’re wearing into the fireplace. The necessary papers can wait until after breakfast.”

They exchanged smiles, although Bruno was cynical enough to know that he was being toyed with. He gave a shrug inside. Recantation? He had done it often enough to escape prosecution. He might even delay signing the documents. He enjoyed being put on trial, to tell the truth. It was pure theater, and the stage belonged to him. In Venice, his case had been important enough that the assigned judges weren’t a row of hand-me-down Jesuits sitting like crows over a corpse, but the bishop himself. For seven months Bruno had argued his case along clever lines.

“Your Excellency, if I have made mistakes regarding Our Lord, give me paper and time. I will recant everything. But these mistakes were accidental.”

The bishop, who ate in the same banquet halls that welcomed Bruno and seduced the women he met there, looked doubtful.

“Accidental? You have theology. You took your vows as a priest.”

“When I was a mere boy. I did not mean I am without God. But God comes to us in many ways, not to be reasoned. He came to me as a brilliant, shining light that revealed the secrets of the natural world, not the world hereafter. I am a thinker, an observer, a philosopher. My mind is astonishingly abstract. Was I not almost made professor of mathematics last year at Padua?”

This was a good card to play. The times were not ignorant, and the Church had moved with the times, recognizing after a long, bloody struggle that the universities added to God; they were not his enemy. Bruno had mixed himself up in the

struggle. If the year had been 1393 instead of 1593, he would have been secreted away and killed immediately. At least now the Church paused to reflect before it condemned novel ideas.

“The chair in mathematics went to Galileo in the end,” remarked the bishop with a tone of respect.

“And Galileo is no more a priest than I am,” Bruno reminded the court. “He turns his eyes to the stars, and so do I. Does it offend God if a man examines his handiwork with awe and wonder? The font of reason cannot hate reason. It glorifies Our Father to have creation explored by the mind of man.”

Yes, he had done well in Venice. The doubters were silenced. If his old friend had not turned murderously jealous, Bruno would have won.

Morning came, and with it the new suit of clothes and the promised breakfast. Bruno ravenously tore at the bread and bacon, washed down with good grappa. He almost wept to see sunlight pouring in through curtains instead of barred windows. He had his back to the room when he heard the solicitous Jesuit enter, but when he turned around, there was no Jesuit, just two guards in polished steel helmets.

“Where are the papers?” Bruno asked. His mind already knew that he had been tricked.

Without reply the guards rushed at him and pinned his arms to his side. One muttered to the other in a rough dialect Bruno didn’t understand. They dragged him into the corridor, allowing him to shout out protests without gagging his mouth. A door studded with iron bolts stood at the end of the corridor. One guard grabbed a smoky torch from a wall sconce while the other shoved Bruno through the door. The flickering flame was just bright enough to keep him from tripping down the stone stairs that appeared at his feet. The circular stairwell took four twists; at the bottom stood a hooded figure with his arms folded over his chest.

Rome means death.

Bruno refused to allow the thought to take hold. “This is a mistake. I’ve agreed to recant. Someone should have told you.”

Without a word the hooded figure gave a nod, and Bruno felt his arms jerked backward. He winced as ropes were knotted around his wrists. The two guards grunted and went back up the winding staircase, taking the torch with them. They left blackness behind, and despite his best efforts Bruno might have felt terror at that moment, except that the hooded figure opened the shuttered lantern he was carrying by his side. Its flickering beam led them down several corridors, around two corners. Bruno tried not to listen for groans.

The hooded figure unlocked a small door and swung it open, stepping aside as Bruno stooped to enter his cell. It wasn’t entirely black inside, thanks to a narrow sun well dug from the surface above. Before Bruno could turn around to say something, the door behind him slammed shut, and a lock clanked mercilessly. With a moan the most notorious heretic in Europe sank to his knees.

There was a knock on the door when they came for him. Bruno promised himself to show courage in the face of torture, but he quaked anyway. Then he realized that torturers wouldn’t knock. Someone was giving him time to pull himself together. Still bound, he did, as best he could, and opened the door to see the solicitous Jesuit, a bland look on his round face.

“May I?”

Bruno bowed and stepped aside. By the light in the sun well, Bruno knew that he had been in his cell for a night and a day. No one had brought food or water. He wouldn’t complain. The Jesuits wanted to shock and demoralize him. If that was their game, he had to figure out one of his own.

“I had a bishop as judge in Venice. I expect no less here in Rome,” he said, getting in the first word. Boldness in the face

of degradation, that would be a good tactic.

The Jesuit examined the cell carefully, as if he expected to find an upholstered chair in the corner. Being stout, he was winded from the long twisting stairs.

“If it comes to a trial,” he said smoothly, “we will supply a cardinal. But this isn’t a trial, I assure you. The Holy Office has earned a reputation for cruelty, but really the Jesuits are the most learned and knowledgeable of all the brothers in Christ. We understand, and where we do not understand, we educate.”

“Do the Jesuits consider me uneducated? That would be novel,” said Bruno.

“Indeed. But not all of your learning seems directed toward God.”

Bruno began to feel more at ease. This was sounding like a debate, and he excelled at debating. A guard appeared at the door. He loosened the ropes that bound Bruno’s wrists behind his back. The muscles had grown so weak that his arms flopped by his side once they were loosened, feeling cold and lifeless. But after a moment Bruno could rub his hands together. He practiced this while the guard led the way up the stairs to the main hall of the castle.

The Jesuit motioned toward a side room, where four other Jesuits were waiting. They didn’t line up behind a bench like a tribunal, but sat around in comfortable chairs. The room gave off a warm smell of mocha and anise rolls, as if Bruno were slightly late for breakfast. He felt a gnawing ache in the pit of his stomach. Out of the corner of his eye he saw one of the Jesuits wipe his mouth with a linen napkin.

“Ah, good. We shall talk. We shall all be comfortable,” this priest said. He was older than the others and apparently in charge.

Boldness, Bruno reminded himself.

He pointed to a bowl filled with fruit on a side table. “We all want this to end quickly. My defense is simple. I need an

apple.”

The Inquisition had been examining heretics since the twelfth century, enough time that nothing surprised them. Bruno could have begged, pleaded, wept, or cried out to God. Thousands of doomed unbelievers had done so, but he was the first to ask for an apple, if he correctly read the surprise that he caused. Without waiting for anyone to move, Bruno strode to the table and whirled around, holding up the cold fruit, which had been spending the winter in a cellar.

“Who made this apple? The Creator. How did he make it? Red, round, crisp, and sweet. Tell me, have I committed heresy by saying those words? Does ‘red’ offend God’s ears? Is ‘round’ against canon law? Are ‘crisp’ and ‘sweet’ evil incantations used to summon the Devil?”

He held the apple higher as his gaze sternly swept the room. “No, of course not. I have described what is to be seen in this apple, as I have described what I see in the skies. I lecture on mathematics and many other subjects. Kings have summoned me to teach them my famous methods in memory. Queen Elizabeth of England may be a damned Protestant, but we didn’t discuss theology. She is growing old, and she wanted instruction in how to remember the names of all her courtiers. I politely obliged.”

Several of the Jesuits nodded, just the way the bishop of Venice had. So it was theater once more. Bruno paused for a second to gather his dramatic powers, but the senior priest interrupted.

“We don’t care.”

“What?”

The priest rose to his feet, padded over to the coffeepot, and poured a steaming cupful into his demitasse. “We don’t care how clever you are. You defended yourself in Venice by claiming to know nothing of theology.”

He wheeled on the prisoner with a bland expression and two cutting words. “Not here.”

Bruno felt strong enough to hold back his anxiety. “You are saying that this apple offends God?”

“I am saying that you offend God. Or are you so vain and puffed up that you’ve forgotten your own words?” Balancing his cup in one hand, the senior Jesuit pulled a paper from his waistband, squinting a little as he read it:

“ ‘The true aim in life should be illumination, true morality the practice of justice’ .”

“Yes, I wrote that, but what could be wrong—”

The priest cut him off. “Let me finish. ‘The true redemption should be the liberation of the soul from error, so that it can reach union with God’ .”

Bruno saw that his accuser had screwed up his face, but his own words moved him, and he blurted out, “Beautiful!”

“Horrible,” the Jesuit snapped back. “Can you stand there hearing your vile heresy and not see hell?”

Bruno felt the blood drain from his face. Suddenly the room was colder, and he swayed as if his spine had softened.

“No,” he muttered softly.

The senior priest eyed him with an indecipherable look. Taking his seat, he nodded to the solicitous Jesuit, who seemed to function as bailiff.

“Giordano Bruno, the defendant,” he began, assuming a formal voice as he stood up. “Witnesses have sworn that you returned to Italy to teach magic and initiate students into the supernatural arts. You traveled in Protestant lands to preach against the one true Church. You converted to Calvinism to curry favor and then suffered excommunication by the Protestants when they could no longer abide your lies. Your books teach a new religion that you call ‘light,’ which is an abomination to the correct faith established by the blessed Jesus Christ.”

The accusations would have kept on unfurling, but the senior Jesuit raised his hand.

“As you can see, Bruno, apples won’t save you.”

The others smiled at the witticism. Bruno felt the urge to scream, but desperation hadn’t blinded his reason. His predicament tightened around his throat. He had followed the divine light. He had believed that all sins are steps away from the light, all redemption steps toward it. He longed for the day when he would be one with God. Nothing else mattered.

There were heretics as numerous as fish in the sea, damned by false witness, conspiracy, intrigue, and jealousy. A few saved themselves, if they knew which way to twist. But Bruno was doomed by something far worse. He had cursed himself before God by seeing the truth.

He was right about one thing: when the torturers came, they didn’t knock. The Holy Office ordered soft torments at first. He had a rag stuffed in his mouth while water was poured into his nose. From the outside this looked like nothing, but to the victim it created a panic unto death. Water gave way to steel tongs, hot coals, rocks pressed on his chest. The torturers never pressed Bruno so hard or heated the coals so hot that he was in danger of dying.

The first year was spent this way, breaking his body. When Bruno was dragged before the four Jesuits again, still seated in armchairs before the fireplace, they asked if he had anything new to tell them.

“I would like a diploma in pain. You can’t say that I haven’t applied myself.”

So the process of breaking him continued. To the Holy Office, torturing a heretic had a spiritual purpose: mercy. Was it not merciful to force out demons, so that a purified soul might stand before God? This kind of mercy ran a few risks. Among the accused, a few would be innocent, yet they tended to confess every kind of horrible sin even before their last fingernails had been plucked out with pincers. The guilty too made lurid false confessions once they were hung from leather

straps until their shoulders dislocated. It was necessary to keep on hanging them until their confessions were reasonable. So the logic went.

After the second year Bruno was shrunk to a collection of seeping wounds and scars. He could no longer walk, and it was hard to understand his speech because it was generally expressed as animal moans. The Holy Office reconsidered the case. The accused had refused to recant, despite all persuasions. Fear of the rack would reduce him to begging, and during those times he would confess to a few pitiful errors. But the heresies in his books were too many and too flagrant. Worse, the people had sympathy for him. The word “martyr” was being whispered.

One day Bruno looked up to see a new priest, lean and young, standing in his cell. The clanking lock and the creak of the door hadn’t awakened him immediately. Bruno spent uncounted hours sleeping; the difference between night and day meant nothing anymore. The only reason he sat up was that the newcomer’s habit wasn’t Jesuit. His swollen eyelids prevented him from making out anything more.

The priest, a Dominican, knelt beside the iron cot. “They’ve allowed me to visit you and bring food. Here.” He held out a basket of provisions. “I’m deeply sorry for you, brother. Ah, I forgot. You didn’t want me to call you that.”

Pain never left him, but as his eyes cleared, Bruno recognized the young Dominican from Venice.

“They’re trying a new tactic. You’re it,” Bruno said.

“I’m not one of them. Do you know how dangerous it is for me to say those words?”

Bruno gave a dry, hoarse laugh. “So the tactic is to be subtle. Good. Talk on.” With a feeble kick he knocked over the basket. “Take your Judas offering when you go.”

“You must eat.”

“Only the living must eat. I am already dead. It has just taken a long time for the news to reach God.”

Carefully the priest gathered up the spilled bread and sausage, putting them back in the basket. “We never really met. I’m Father Andrea. I’m here to console you.”

Bruno held out his hand, made crooked and deformed by bones that were broken too often to heal. “Console this,” he said.

Father Andrea’s eyes widened. “Do you have no faith left at all? ‘Even faith the size of a mustard seed—’”

Harshly Bruno cut him off. “You dare? Get out!”

He threw the basket at the priest’s head, sending the provisions flying. They looked at each other silently, the only sound being the scurry of rats, who couldn’t believe that food suddenly fell from the sky.

Father Andrea murmured, “I am your only hope.”

“The dead don’t need hope.”

And so the first meeting ended. But the virtue of patience was strong in the Dominican. He returned every day. He was willing to sit for hours while Bruno turned his face to the wall, refusing to acknowledge his visitor. Finally, one day was different. When the priest entered the cell, Bruno was pacing back and forth restlessly, as if his legs had healed overnight.

“I will talk with you. Do you know why?”

Father Andrea smiled. “You have care for your soul.”

Bruno laughed. He sounded bizarrely merry. “No. I understand immortality now, for the first time, and I need to tell someone before they kill me. Something so precious cannot go to waste.”

The priest looked crestfallen, but his patience didn’t falter. “Go on.”

Bruno became more animated. “I will unfold something stupendous. You see, I have gone beyond death. As the body withers, the soul expands. More and more I am blind to this

world. It is dissolving, vanishing like a wisp of smoke. Last night, God held out immortality to me.”

Bruno’s rheumy eyes burned and overflowed with tears. “But I didn’t take it. I’ve returned to tell the world what I know. You must pay attention. Do you understand?”

This mixture of vanity and madness made Father Andrea’s heart sink, but he kept quiet.

“The secret of immortality lies with God,” Bruno began, “but what is God? In these times, no one is safe who asks that question, even though it occurs to every child. The only difference is that I never stopped asking. I couldn’t.”

Sorrowfully Father Andrea said, “Perhaps it was a good question with evil consequences.”

“I don’t believe that. To question God is to move closer to him.”

“And closer to danger.”

Bruno gave a wry smile. “No doubt. Try to accept that I was not led by Satan when I questioned God. I am a man of the age, and in this age we want to know everything. My obsession with God brought answers, and the Jesuits cannot force me into denying that these answers were divine.”

Bruno raised his hand. “I know you want to object, but let me finish. If everything was made by God, then God is in everything. We cannot limit the Infinite. Therefore, God is in every creature, every hill and tree, and every person. Why don’t we see the God in us? Because the light has been pushed away by ignorance and error. This much I realized before I was betrayed in Venice.”

Father Andrea couldn’t control himself. “The Church teaches none of this. You are stepping on sacred ground, where you don’t belong.”

“Peace. I have only a little more. When I was thrown into this hole, I despaired. Not for my life, because it befits a wise man to accept death calmly and sometimes to seek it. Yet in

my agony something else happened. As my body was destroyed, the light shone brighter. The joke is on the Jesuits. Their torments stripped away all my fears, for nothing can be worse than the worst. Beyond the horror of pain I found the light I have searched for, and I was bathed in it until, all at once, *I became the light.*”

The fervor in Bruno’s voice caused the priest to bury his face in his hands; the prisoner was spelling his own doom. Bruno tugged at Father Andrea’s arm, making him look up.

“You live for the truth, yes? If your vows mean anything, report that you did not see madness in my eyes or the burning gaze of a demon. The light is the truth. It is in all things, and when we know this, we can work back to the light. Nothing else is needed. The stink and hypocrisy of the Church are meaningless. I should have excommunicated the Pope long ago. But the light embraces even the worst among men. Even a Pope can be saved.”

After this, the Dominican paid no more visits. He was bound to report Bruno’s words to the Holy Office. They had enough evidence to condemn him then and there. But Bruno’s cause was becoming scandalous, and the Jesuits retreated into silence. No word was issued about the proceedings, and for seven years his imprisonment continued. There were more tortures, more interrogations. To the immense irritation of the tribunal, Bruno stood firm in his refusal to recant. It would have taken a brave lawyer months to untangle the convoluted charges against Bruno, which kept changing—bravery was needed because the lawyer could find himself thrown into prison too. Bruno had no lawyer at all. He lapsed into stubborn, weary silence, listening apathetically to the rigmarole of obscure Latin. On the days when he had just been tortured, his head lolled against his chest; he sat in court half conscious and moaning.

Finally the day came when people had forgotten the scandal. Seven years into his trial, Bruno was hauled before a cardinal, just as the senior Jesuit had promised that first day.

The flash of red in the prelate's costume glowed in the dim courtroom.

“Does the prisoner have anything to say before the sentence is pronounced?”

Bruno was a gaunt shell, with no bone left unbroken. He raised his head. “Nothing.”

The court wasted no time with solemn gestures. Bruno was sentenced to burn at the stake immediately, after a spike was driven through his blasphemous tongue and his heretical mouth was closed with an iron cage.

He listened with a pensive look. “I believe you are more afraid to sentence me than I am to hear it,” he said.

This was taken as one last impudence from a man who was determined to be reckless his entire life. The cardinal rose, casting a contemptuous glance. If he replied to Bruno's taunt, it was not recorded.

The burning took place at the Campo de' Fiori, a large and crowded flower market. Business stopped only briefly for the spectacle. The iron cage clamped around his jaw prevented Bruno from crying out, although his body writhed in the flames. An impudent priest—or perhaps an impostor who had stolen a cassock—dared to jump on the woodpile to hold a crucifix before Bruno's eyes. He turned his head away, and Vatican guards quickly pulled the priest off the pyre to drag him from the scene.

When the heretic's body was consumed to ashes, the crowd had scattered. An unknown member of the clergy took a handful of ash and scattered it to the winds, where it disappeared in the Roman twilight like a thin wisp of smoke.

Revealing the Vision

With the life and death of Giordano Bruno two worlds crash into each other, and the reverberations are still with us. Faith and science began as enemies, because facts threatened to

depose faith. This threat was clear to the Church authorities who pounced on scientific breakthroughs as if they were heresies. A fact cannot be a heresy unless you force it to be. One can conceive of a Church that welcomes science as a new way to glorify God's creation. The Church could have permitted God to be a rational Creator working through natural laws. This wasn't the Church that Bruno tried to accommodate, either by blending in as a monk, teaching as a professor, or prodding as a scientist.

One problem with all of his tactics was that Bruno had many mad ideas—his aristocratic pupil in Venice betrayed him to the Inquisition, because Bruno refused to teach him the supernatural arts. Bruno considered himself an expert in these arts; he toyed with “magical mathematics.” You have to pick through a jumble of fantasy and speculation to arrive at Bruno's revolutionary spirituality; but once you arrive, his insights still amaze.

He saw what other mystics had seen, that nature is a field of light emanating from the Godhead. But what makes Bruno revelatory is that he depended, not on faith, but sheerly on the mind to see what he saw. He stands for the human mind as a part of God's mind. Today we still struggle over whether spirituality is consistent with reason. To be a scientist doesn't automatically make you an atheist. But it does send you into the swampy ground where faith can sink under you like quicksand.

When Bruno was burned at the stake on February 17, 1600, it was a bright morning bustling with flower sellers in a busy Roman market. One can almost imagine housewives in aprons buying winter roses. His case had grown infamous, so what came from the crowd was probably a mixture of jeers and tears. It was the final curtain in a long, cruel, slow drama that had lasted seven years. Bruno was important enough as a thinker to survive this long; his recantation meant something to the Pope and the Holy Office.

And the court's judgment, holding that Bruno had denied the divinity of Christ, wasn't a mistake. He had flirted with the

Arian heresy, which questioned whether Christ was equal to God. But it's unlikely that this was more than a passing phase in Bruno's mental journey—which was fickle, daring, inspired, ridiculous, noble, and bizarre, depending on where you try to pin it down. He is remembered today as a martyr for intellectual freedom, especially by scientists, who group him with Kepler and Galileo, brave followers of the new astronomy that began when Copernicus declared that the earth moved around the sun.

One thing Bruno wasn't is a scientist. In his lifetime he was best known for a system of mnemonic techniques that interested even kings and queens, such as Elizabeth I in England. As a personality he wasn't able to please those in power, however, and he managed to alienate every court he attached himself to, sometimes getting driven out of the country. He was a contrarian, and those who remembered him said he was introverted and inclined to be melancholy.

In the end, after his gruesome death, the piteous tale of Giordano Bruno became an symbol, but an ambiguous one. I was drawn to the mystical side of him. Inspired by the new discoveries being made in the stars and planets, Bruno's mind took astonishing leaps. He was convinced that there were infinite worlds; life existed on these worlds and perhaps even angels. Instead of being fixed on the seventh day of God's creation, nature was constantly in motion. In fact, the cosmos was probably expanding at a fantastic rate, which means that creation is a continuing process. Taking such leaps enabled Bruno to sound amazingly like a contemporary of ours, as when he writes:

Everywhere there is incessant relative change in position throughout the universe, and the observer is always at the center of things.

That's Bruno putting on his scientist's cap, but there was not enough science in his day to warrant such a daring leap. His real journey was toward the transcendent, the field of light that

in his mind was merged with God, nature, and the starry night sky:

The Divine Light is always in man, presenting itself to the senses and to the comprehension, but man rejects it.

As the future unfolded, the domains of science got sorted out. Astronomy was separated from astrology. Evolution replaced Genesis. So it's natural that Bruno can't be a martyr for both camps—unless. In that small word “unless” another revolution could be taking place. As modern people, we inherited the scientific revolution. The conquest of superstition is part and parcel of that revolution, as is the separation of reason from unreason. It sends a shudder to read that more witches were burned in England after the death of Shakespeare in 1616 than before; such hysterical persecution wasn't just happening in Salem, Massachusetts.

For four hundred years we have moved away from Bruno's field of light only to come full circle. The unit of light is the photon, and physics recognizes that all interactions responsible for matter and energy in the cosmos involve the photon. In other words, human beings exist in the field of light, and our bodies, quite literally, came from stardust. Going even farther, some farsighted physicists wonder if the universe has a mind; to them, it acts like a living being as it evolves and develops more and more complex forms. The human brain, so far as we know, is the most complex thing in existence. Was it really a product of random chance over the past 13 billion years? To believe in randomness as the only creative force in nature, one physicist quipped, is like saying that a hurricane blew through a junkyard and built a Boeing 777.

I lament that the two key words “intelligent” and “design” got hijacked by religious fundamentalism for the purpose of defending the creation story found in Genesis. There is no doubt that Genesis is actually a creation myth, and a beautiful one. It exists to tell us about ourselves at a mythical level; for that, it doesn't need to be rejected. More fascinating is a

liberated view of intelligence and design, which could lead to a cosmos reborn.

Bruno was a witness to the last time that happened. In the rebirth of the universe thanks to Copernicus, Bruno had the most expanded vision of possibilities. He makes statements that could be straight from Shankara and the ancient Vedic tradition in India:

I understand Being in all and over all, as there is nothing without participation in Being.

It is our loss that Being has ceased to be a mystery, as it was for Bruno and all mystics. “To be” seems like a given, a blank. “I am” simply means that you are present. Being suddenly acquires its mystery once more, however, when you dip into modern physics and discover that the entire universe emerged from a void. This theme arises frequently as we touch on the visionaries in this book, and yet it must be emphasized that the void that preceded the universe is a fact. Everything that looks solid and familiar is actually the product of mystery.

The noted English neurologist Sir John Eccles makes this point with stark clarity: “I want you to realize that there exists no color in the natural world, and no sound—nothing of this kind; no textures, no patterns, no beauty, no scent.” Every quality in nature is the opposite of reassuring; it belongs to the reality illusion that we surround ourselves with. When two lovers hold hands, it seems as if two warm, pliant objects are enfolding, but that is pure illusion. Every sensation is created in our own awareness from invisible properties like electromagnetism. In fact, the atoms that are the building blocks of the universe have no physical properties at all; therefore, nothing made of atoms can be physical either.

Bruno was a rare combination of mystic and rationalist, which enabled him to grapple very early on with the reality illusion. He had been thrown out of the Dominican order, but remained intent upon God, and he assumed that when he talked about nature, he was talking about God at the same time.

There is no being without Essence. Thus nothing can be free of the Divine Presence. . . . Nature is none other than God in things.

Is that last sentence literally true? Looking for “God in things,” we no longer apply the lens of Christianity, yet there is no doubt that the search remains the same. What lens do we need? There are many answers floating around the scientific and spiritual community; some optimists believe the two will join together once they recognize that they are after the same unicorn: a vision of God and nature that erases all boundaries and yields the final answer to nature’s riddles.

If that happens, Bruno’s tale will find its justification, not as a martyr’s tale to be pitied, but a seer’s to be celebrated. To redeem him fully, we have to accept another of his visionary sayings: “It is manifest . . . that every soul and spirit hath a certain continuity with the spirit of the universe.” Bruno saw this truth with a courageous clarity we can only envy. In time God was allowed to become a rational Creator. The Church regretted its persecution phase, and today it is permissible to preach that facts glorify God’s marvelous works. But as he evolved to make peace with gravity and thermodynamics, God is still frowning over stem cells and the first days of life in the womb—or so the Church holds. The truce between faith and facts remains uneasy.

8

Anne Hutchinson

“Spirit Is Perfect in Every Believer”

The mother stood on the shore with eleven children gathered around her and spread her arms.

“Behold Leviathan!”

It was hard not to behold a beached whale, and much harder not to smell it. The stinking carcass was an unusual find, washed up from the schools of whales that spouted like an Italian fountain garden off the Massachusetts coast. The local natives (who were feared as “the savages” no matter how peaceful they acted) had rushed to the scene ahead of the colonists. They lacked boats big and strong enough to launch into the teeming pods. But when a dead whale washed ashore, a time of plenty had arrived.

Some braves straddled the back of the massive gray beast with long spears, slicing off swaths of flesh that flopped with a smack on the sand. Women knelt with small stone blades to carve away chunks of meat for drying.

“Do you know what this means?” the mother asked, addressing her flock like a teacher.

“It means their tribe will eat this winter,” said Bridget, one of the older daughters.

“If they don’t rob our barns first,” muttered Francis, one of the middle sons, who resented being dragged across the sea to please God. Dreaming about a sweetheart in England, he had spent the summer digging rocks out of the so-called soil on a farm outside Boston.

The mother frowned. “Think not of this world. Surely this is a sign.”

The Hutchinson brood, which was excited to see their first dead whale, quieted down. They knew, even down to the tiniest, that their mother could find a sermon in anything. She had already found one as they picked their way over the rocky beach. It began, “And the Lord said to Joshua, ‘Take up twelve stones from the river Jordan’ ” and continued until they reached the spot where the whale lay stewing in the unseasonal heat.

If Anne Hutchinson could make a sermon from stones, she would feast—theologically speaking—on a whale. She pointed at it, entirely ignoring the smell, the half-naked savages clambering around, and the possibility that visitors from the Puritan colony might not be welcome.

“What is Leviathan?” Anne asked. “The Bible tells us.”

“One of the seven princes of hell,” a boy in the back piped up.

“And is this dumb creature before us a prince of hell?” asked Anne.

“He could be a princess, if he’s not a he,” suggested Katherine, one of the youngest girls.

Anne smiled. “The Bible speaks only of princes, child.” She decided to answer her own question, since the urge to sermonize was growing impatient. “No, this creature is not a prince of hell. But the Bible tells us that Leviathan was guilty of pride, and thus is pride fallen here. No fish is prouder than the whale, which rules the sea. Yet this one was smitten, and now he has become carrion for any passing dog.”

None of her children complained as Anne discoursed. They had arrived in the New World the year before, 1634, to join the new Eden that God had ordered them to populate. Back in England the only reality they had ever known was Puritan. A serious and godly reality, in the extreme. Everyone they saw at church was exercised over the corruption of the Anglican clergy. All hated the papists and reviled King Charles for marrying a Catholic queen, or whore, as the

Puritans openly called her. Nobody crossed themselves or prayed to saints, as their Anglican neighbors did. None of them venerated the Virgin Mary or knelt before the cross as they entered a pew.

But the oldest Hutchinson children did know that having a sermonizing mother was unusual. The most ambitious preachers in Boston, in their long black frock coats, gave Anne Hutchinson a wide berth when it came to scripture. She was past forty, not young and no longer of girlish features. It would never have occurred to her to wear makeup to disguise her years, just as, being a Puritan, she wore honest black and brown. Fancy colors were vanity. But her face glowed when she recited scripture; in repose she showed the strain of bearing fourteen children and burying three. Since she wore a tight cap that covered her hair, the lines in her face stood out. So did her piercing eyes.

At this moment, without preparation, she began reciting twenty verses on Leviathan from the book of Job, beginning, “Can you pull in the leviathan with a fishhook or tie down his tongue with a rope? Can you put a cord through his nose or pierce his jaw with a hook?”

Her husband, William, came up over the dunes; he had lingered behind to arrange the return coach to Boston. Winded and unprepared for the stench, he stopped to catch his breath. He was close enough to hear Anne reciting, and it made him smile. He had money, many children, and, rarest of all, a wife who knew as much as any man about the Bible. The younger daughters giggled when their mother reached this verse: “Can you make a pet of him like a bird or put him on a leash for your girls?”

Anne was a tolerant preacher, unlike some, and she merely raised a finger. “Here is what I want you to especially notice, my dears. ‘Who would approach him with a bridle? Who dares open the doors of his mouth, ringed about with his fearsome teeth?’”

She paused expectantly, and when none of her children spoke up, their father filled the breach. “What your mother means,” he said, half walking, half falling down the steep dunes, “is that Leviathan guarded the mouth of hell. So the whale’s enormous mouth was given by God as a sign of the trap that awaits all sinners.”

“Nothing less,” said Anne. “How marvelous is the book of Creation, and how blessed that God has opened it to us.”

William liked the look of contentment that spread over her face. She saw God’s hand in everything, which was the Puritan way. To trip over a curb or drop an egg meant that you needed to examine your spotted soul. Calamity and persecution had made the Puritans search for the tiniest grain of sin in themselves. The farmers joked that every spring brought a new crop of stones in their fields. It was a grim joke at that, and secretly a few saints, as they called each other, doubted if God approved of their errand in the wilderness.

The first to throw their fate to Providence, the Pilgrims had landed fifteen years before, in 1620. Prying sod from the ground to build huts, they couldn’t have foreseen Hutchinson’s fine white timber house in the center of Boston. Their grim records from that first year were terse, but horrifying.

In December, bitter weather had set in, far worse than anything known in England. On December 25, the hardiest settlers departed the *Mayflower* to live on shore. The date wasn’t significant, since they didn’t observe Christmas, which was invented by the papists in Rome.

Six people died that month, eight more in January. Seventeen perished in February. What was killing them? For some, it was voluntary starvation as mothers gave their rations to their children. Thirteen of eighteen married women died; only three children did. The rest died of scurvy or of a plague no one could name. They would simply whisper “the sickness” when another fell victim. God was not smiling.

Still the settlers built their crude shelters and still they prayed, every waking minute that could be spared. It wasn’t

until the first day of spring that the last Pilgrims came off the boat, and even as March warmed, thirteen more died. Burials were conducted at night under the cloak of darkness, for fear that the savages would become bolder if they saw how the number of intruders had dwindled. (Not that the Indians showed their faces; that first winter they lurked like shadows in the forest.) Looking around the Plymouth graveyard, the survivors counted forty-five graves, almost half their number. The mouth of hell, reflected William Hutchinson, had opened on that beach too.

Unless it was the mouth of heaven. When they were alone he'd consult Anne, who had a gift for reading God's tests and rewards. The family spread a cloth on the hill overlooking the beach, picking a spot away from the smell. It was a pleasant outing, and the children got a surprise at the end, a bit of honey to pour over their bread. But as clouds moved in from the sea and they quickly rose to pack up and retreat to the wagons, a fleck of color caught Anne's eye.

Katherine, who tended to be dreamy, had taken a pink ribbon from her doll's dress and tied it into her own hair. Anne stared for a second, controlling her anger.

"Give that here, child," she said, holding out her hand.

Katherine knew that when Mother spoke in a flat, quiet voice, something bad had happened. She handed over the offending ribbon and forced herself not to cry. The walk back to the wagons was somber. The clouds had quickly gathered into a gray blanket overhead; drops began to fall.

They were lucky, and the shower was light, not enough to penetrate the homespun cloaks they bundled their heads in. Addressing no one in particular, Anne said, "Jezebel. We shall speak of her. Anyone can go first."

None of the other children spoke up, since it was obvious that Katherine needed to answer, even if she was barely seven.

"Jezebel was an evil queen who worshipped idols," said Katherine. "And she was an adult."

Seven wasn't too young to hear about adultery, but perhaps too young to be focused on it. Anne let the mistake pass. "The queen tried to kill the prophet Elijah," she said, "but the Lord killed Jezebel instead. Nothing escapes his eye, even the most innocent transgression."

Fingering the pink ribbon, she unfolded a tale of miracles and gore. Jezebel, the wife of Ahab, was intent on destroying the God of Israel, so that her false god, Baal, might be victorious. She gathered 450 prophets of Baal to contest one prophet of the Israelites, Elijah. Empowered by the Lord, Elijah proposed a simple test to prove who was the real God. A fire sacrifice would be mounted. The 450 prophets of Baal built an immense pyre of offerings and prayed to Baal to send fire to set it alight. Their voices arose in a loud chorus of pleading, and when no fire came, they cut their flesh with knives. But even the blood of priests brought nothing from their god.

Elijah had built a small pyre, and to show his supreme confidence he poured a beaker of water on it three times. Lifting his eyes, Elijah asked God to send down fire, and in an instant the pyre was ablaze. Jezebel was foiled; she never forgot the insult.

"She plotted against Elijah," said Anne, "but her evil was to no avail. In time Jezebel was trampled to death by horses and her body eaten by dogs."

"Except for her skull and the palms of her hands," interjected one of the boys, who was eager for biblical tests.

"Except for them," nodded Anne, taking Katherine's doll and tying the pink ribbon around its waist again. The little girl had images that night of dogs chewing on the corpse of a bedizened queen sporting pink ribbons in her hair.

The gore didn't disturb mother or child. As a child herself in England, Anne had heard bloody readings from books of martyrs. They fascinated her, and she could calmly munch on a teacake while looking at engravings of a saint's disembowelment. It was only natural to sympathize with

martyrs since her own father, a preacher with outspoken Puritan leanings, had been imprisoned and convicted of heresy for defying official church authority. The family was in sore deprivation during the period when he was under house arrest.

The worse the Puritans were persecuted, the more righteous they became. The line between themselves and everyone else became hard and fast in the New World. A commonwealth had been established to look out for everyone's good, but the saints, as they called each other, would never be like the strangers, as non-Puritans were known. No one kept the line more definite than Anne, until she made a mistake and suddenly being a saint was not so scandalously easy as before. For now, the crisis was waiting in the wings, not yet ready to occur.

It would be awhile before the newborn baby, crying and thrashing as it entered the world, asked, "Am I saved or am I damned?" For the moment, he was simply beautiful. Anne wrapped the infant in swaddling clothes and handed it around. The mother, exhausted from labor, had fallen asleep. But she was safely attended. At least ten other women assembled for the birth, in an informal ceremony known as a gossiping. They cooed over the new little boy. Anne, as leader of the group, was well satisfied. She knew that there was a danger that the mother, the child, or both might die in the coming weeks. It was important to have pure attendants to keep that from happening.

"Send word to the father, all is well," she told one of the women, who scurried from the room. Anne was in her element and happy to be there. She looked around.

"In what condition is this child come into the world?" she asked.

The other women knew that they were about to hear a pronouncement, and they were eager to.

“First, it is born into freedom from oppression and the reach of kings, unlike our dear Lord, who was forced to flee Herod’s wrath,” Anne began. If anyone in the room wondered how Boston could be out of the reach of King Charles, she didn’t say so. Defiance to the crown was a popular stand.

“In its condition, this baby arrives in the company of the righteous,” said Anne. “We have determined our own fate, as a free congregation. But none of this will matter if a baby carries the stain of sin into this world. Look at him. Where is the stain? What has he done, weak and helpless as a kitten, to deserve God’s censure?”

This was the nub of the question, and one could hear a nervous cough in the background. But the women would protect her, no matter what she said in that room. The Puritan men knew this, and Anne counted on it. The newborn had been passed around the circle and came back to her. She kissed its forehead. To the women around Anne this was all but a benediction.

“So he is saved?” one of the younger women asked.

“I hope so,” Anne murmured. “But Christ spoke to me to tell me that I am saved, and that is a path open to everyone. Spirit is gracious, and spirit is perfect in every believer.”

Christ had spoken to her personally? The women in the birthing room were awed.

An outsider could be forgiven for taking Anne innocently. Grace and spirit were common coin in every church. But to the Puritans these were loaded terms, fraught with danger and hope. Those sojourners who had braved the ocean crossing were betting their souls in a cosmic wager. To the naked eye the Puritans had landed in a trap, exchanging the familiar world of home for a savage wilderness. But home was a fouled nest. Here at least they could sit apart as the elect, favored by God to build a city on the hill.

With one sticking point. When strangers, non-Puritans, landed in America, they could strike out individually and

damn the consequences. The saints could only succeed by holding together.

Every Sunday Boston's preachers leaned over the pulpit dangling torment and damnation. "Work, work, work! Toil ceaselessly for your souls, brothers and sisters. If any of you slip, the fiery pit yawns open for us all."

The sticking point is that you never knew if your toil had succeeded. Original sin was an invisible stain even on the freshest newborn baby, and for the rest of his life only God knew if that baby was one of the elect or one of the damned.

Anne had grown up knowing no other theology. Her father took her by the hand one day when she was seven or eight. He wasn't yet the firebrand who would get thrown into prison for his sermons against the bishops. The family lived peaceably in London, and it was a short walk to the Thames.

Her father pointed to the south across the brown sluggish water. "Tell me what you see," he said.

Anne craned her neck over the parapet that lined the shore. "Little boats, big boats. Men fishing. And those pretty flags," she said, pointing to the theaters in Southwark, on the opposite bank, that ran up their pennants on sunny days to signal that a performance would be held. They were woven of bright colors and sported emblems of lions and mythical beasts.

"Not pretty flags, my child," her father corrected. "Across the river is Sodom, where sin brazenly announces itself. There, the wicked tempt those who are an inch away from turning wicked."

Nothing showed the divide between the elect and the damned as much as the theaters, which in the eyes of Puritans were a sinkhole of depravity. Diversions and entertainments were diabolical tricks. Even on the rare occasion when a decent religious drama might be staged—not the disgusting works of a Devil's disciple like Shakespeare—the theaters were surrounded by inns where drunkenness, gambling, bearbaiting, and cockfights took place every night. An honest

citizen could be ruined simply setting foot in the streets. True to their name, cutpurses roamed the crowds with their knives at the ready, quick to cut a victim's money purse loose and run away.

Anne's father looked grim. "I promise you, child, one day God will wipe this iniquity off the face of the earth or he will send us to a place where virtue can prevail."

It frightened Anne to hear such things. Fear for her soul stifled the other side of her nature, which wanted to take one of the small skiffs across the river to see for herself what iniquity looked like—to tell the truth, it might look like fun. That was only a momentary fancy, if it existed at all. But Anne took something else away that day.

"Am I an inch away from turning wicked?" she asked.

Her father smiled. "Of course."

Only those two words. He didn't turn their stroll into a sermon, but Anne felt struck to the heart. "Of course" she was in peril of being damned; her father could tell her so with a satisfied smile. Growing up, Anne never mentioned to him what his words did to her. Events moved quickly and tumultuously. Her father was in prison and out again, transferred to a remote living in Alford, far away from London in Lincolnshire, where he would cause no trouble. But he kept railing against the bishops, and then the meager living was snatched away and he was put under house arrest. The ups and downs never ended. If Anne hadn't married two years after her father suddenly died, she might have wound up a poor servant.

Anne grew up knowing travail, but each blow had a divine meaning, as all tests do. The meaning was that God would not wipe the new Sodom off the face of the earth. He was showing through every setback and outrage against the Puritans that they must seek a world elsewhere. No other choice was possible. Yet when they arrived in the colonies, the elect were throwing the dice. Raw nature posed worse travails than any bishop back home. London was scourged by bubonic plague, but this new place was scourged by "the sickness." London

had cutpurses, but the colonies had savages. The only hope was to be more rigid, strict, and vigilant than ever.

“Why are we so sorely tested?” the preachers railed. “Because we are so close to the goal. God must scour every spot of sin before he admits us into the company of the blessed—it is just around the corner.” It was a message no one disbelieved, or if they did, they fled Boston when no one was looking and never returned. The wilderness would deliver judgment on them soon enough. The only threat that shook the Puritans came unexpectedly, from within. Anne Hutchinson had been visited personally by Christ, and he showed her another way.

There was no question of accusing her publicly, not at first. The Hutchinson house, which stood very near the governor’s, attracted more and more people who wanted to hear Anne unfold God’s grace. These were not just women from the gossipings, although it helped that Anne attended almost every birth as midwife. Preachers rode in from surrounding towns. The freemen of the colony, being the most important church members, elected a new governor every year, and for 1636 it was young Henry Vane, barely thirty, who supported religious tolerance—he made a point of spending evenings at the Hutchinsons’. On a pleasant night as many as sixty people might pass through their open door.

Eyes were always watching outside the door, however. Some of those eyes belonged to families that felt the colony was their private possession. They had settled first, invested their money in shares, and prevailed in ensuring that Massachusetts would be strictly Puritan. Newcomers were feared. There was pressure on the crown to change the original charter, which allowed almost anyone to settle in the Bay Colony. The old guard tightened its control over Boston.

“Tolerance is all well and good,” they muttered, “until we are tolerated out of existence.”

Boston was too small for the two factions not to pass on the street every day. One elder and former governor, John Winthrop, was the thorniest and most outspoken among the old guard. If anyone first uttered the word “sedition” about Anne, it was he or a man clinging to his coattails.

“Don’t tell me I must stop speaking because one old stiff-neck thinks he is mightier than God,” said Anne. She was resolved, but so was Winthrop, and it was worrisome that he had got himself elected deputy governor, which gave him a place from which to attack young Vane, freshly arrived from England.

“He won’t last. I’ll wager he won’t even stay,” Winthrop declared behind closed doors.

When William Hutchinson went about on business, pleasant greetings in the street turned to curt nods and then nothing at all. Passing Winthrop was like a winter’s blast.

“He says you offer the easy path,” William said one night after company had left. He stood in his nightshirt beside the narrow bed he shared with Anne, tucking in warm stones wrapped in cloth while she made sure the candles were safely out.

“Easy? In England I could walk out to look at the moon in December and not risk freezing to death. There’s no easy path here,” said Anne.

“You know what he means.”

“He means that God wants every settler to break his back until John Winthrop says, ‘That’s almost enough, brother. Just ten years more, if you please.’ ”

William bit his lip. “I only say this. Don’t tread on him unless you know what you do.”

Anne had such calm self-assurance that she might have replied, “Let him try treading on me. It’s the same as treading on God.” A grain of humility made her keep the thought to herself. Yet no one could doubt that Anne’s defense was the Bible and her fierce knowledge of it. Scripture was a tangled

skein that she unraveled easily, moving from the prophets to the Gospels, from King David to the king of kings, without having to find the passages with her finger. A marvel of a godly woman—unless you happened to hate her.

Winthrop had a long, narrow face designed for disapproval, so it was impossible to tell that his mood was darkening. But he never stopped burrowing in one tunnel or another. After his term of one year, Vane was sent packing back to London, and Winthrop once again became governor. The preachers who sympathized with Anne quailed, except for a few.

Standing at the gangplank before his ship left, Vane regarded the town of Boston.

“Built on three hills, but it’s not a city on a hill, is it?” he murmured. “The new Jerusalem isn’t before me.” A dream was quickly vanishing.

Vane promised Anne and her followers that he would get a new charter from the king to overturn the colony. Brave words, but soon Vane was caught up in his own brand of sedition. Revolution was his calling now, and what awaited him was beheading.

Not that Anne foresaw this or the other calamities in the future. The first came swiftly enough.

“There’s to be a trial,” said William, weeks after Vane had departed.

“For what?” said Anne.

“The worst. Heresy.”

“Send the court a message. If they want a fair trial, they should charge themselves with heresy at the same time.”

Puritan trials were simple affairs. The defendant was burdened by guilt even before being told the charges. The process of getting a confession took almost no time. Winthrop stood up with the intent of flattening Mrs. Hutchinson like all the others.

“You hold assemblies in your house, a thing that is not tolerable to God and not fitting to your sex,” he began. “You trouble the peace of the commonwealth and our churches.”

“I don’t hear a legal charge yet,” Anne rejoined.

“I’ve named them, and I can name more.”

“I haven’t heard one. What have I said or done?”

Her steadiness flustered Winthrop. “You are part of a faction that—”

She cut him off. “What faction? When did I join?”

Winthrop searched for words. “It is generally known that you entertain these people.”

“I asked you before—name my legal offense.”

She was tearing him apart with tiny cuts, nitpicking every blustering accusation.

“Your opinions are against the word of God. They may seduce innocent souls who come to hear you. If you keep on, our only course is to retrain you or put you away from us.”

Anne almost smiled. “You may, sir, if you have a rule for it from God.” At thrust and parry Winthrop was hopeless.

He knew it and exploded. “We are your judges, not you ours!”

Anne had a reply, but the trial was hastily adjourned as night fell. They couldn’t get her to confess, which baffled everyone; courts had no other job. William left with high hopes. Winthrop had walked into a disaster.

But Anne was somber, and that night her husband fell asleep without his wife beside him. It wasn’t like her to pray all night, but then this was the most extraordinary night of her life.

The next morning she seemed changed, and it wasn’t simply the exhaustion of exercising her soul.

“My dear,” said William gingerly.

Anne set her jaw. "It's all right. I know the truth. God tells me that I must speak it."

She stood up in court before the magistrates could say a word against her.

"If you give me leave, I will tell you what God has revealed to me. The ground of my belief is that He has blessed me. He has shown me how to hear the voice of Moses and the voice of my beloved Jesus. I can hear the voice of John the Baptist and the voice of the Antichrist."

A judge spoke up. "How did you know it was the Spirit?"

"How did Abraham know it was God who told him to sacrifice his son?" said Anne.

"He heard an immediate voice from heaven."

"Just as I do."

They knew they had her then. Revelation was the rock of Christian belief. When Christ was taken away, the new faith would have died if the apostles had not heard from the Holy Spirit. Unfortunately for Anne, worshipping the old revelations wasn't the same as believing the new ones.

The judges leaned forward, pressing her to repeat what she'd said, but Anne refused.

"You have power over my body, but the Lord has power over my body and my soul."

The atmosphere was tense and quiet. She was speaking things no one could disagree with now, and her followers saw a glimmer of hope. If only she had stopped there. But she didn't.

Turning to Winthrop and the others, Anne raised her voice. "I assure you, if you continue with this trial and the course it is taking, you will bring a curse down upon you and your posterity. *The mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.*"

A collective groan went up, followed by consternation. Anne's followers believed her message and trembled. Her

enemies were glad to have heresy so plainly revealed. Only a few kept silent, probably out of cynicism. They knew that her condemnation was inevitable. The old guard had won. But whoever they were, every observer believed in divine revelation. They had to doubt. Had Anne Hutchinson delivered an inspired message, or was she playing the same guilt game that no Puritan could escape, including herself? Whichever it was, Anne condemned herself out of her own mouth. Winthrop declared that Mrs. Hutchinson was delusional; the court found her guilty of sedition.

She barely noticed the sentence of banishment when it was pronounced. She spoke up once more, mildly.

“I desire to know the reason why I am banished.”

Winthrop replied, “The court knows the reason and is satisfied.”

In her heart Anne wanted to go and so did the ministers who believed in tolerance. They scattered north and south, founding new towns as far away as Maine and Connecticut. The old guard tightened the rules, making it illegal for any to house a new settler under their roof for more than three weeks. After that time, a magistrate would decide who belonged and who didn't. Faith and politics had found a way to forge the same manacles.

Anne led her family into the wilderness with eighteen others. Did she hear the voice of Moses then? The group founded a new town in Rhode Island, a safer place to hear revelations. Looking out over the sea, which still teemed with whale spouts, Anne worried that Winthrop's faction would reach out and swallow up the new settlements. She and the younger children pressed farther south, beyond any English charter. Even then the spirit wouldn't let her rest.

William was the lucky one, dying before they moved again. Anne never saw a new city. She landed in the forest among scattered dwellings just north of the Dutch colony in New Amsterdam. She was uprooted from her own people. God's eye was upon her, of that she never wavered. His eye

was upon her when she heard her voices. It was upon her when she read the book of Creation. It must have been upon her one night in 1643 when the local Indians, enraged by how the Dutch had misused them, attacked the house.

All those who had gathered around Anne, including six of her children, were murdered that night. The horrifying news spread that their scalps had been taken, and worse, a young daughter named Susanna, only nine years old, had been captured by the Indians. Captivity was a fate no female could regard without dread.

Legend has it that in the confusion of the attack, young Susanna ran away and hid in a large cleft rock in the shape of a tortoise shell or a whale's humped back. Leviathan hid her from the worst of the savagery, until she was found by the attackers and whisked away into the forest. By then the raiders were over their murderous mood. Telling the story in later years, the settlers took to calling the cleft formation that the girl hid in Spirit Rock.

The Hutchinson family that was left in Boston never ceased their search for Susanna. She had been a babe in arms when her parents sailed to the colonies. The Indians raised her in captivity—she rarely spoke of any details—and after a few years they traded her back to the English. She returned to Boston. To bridge the unspeakable gap when Susanna had been gone, she was treated like an unknown person and reintroduced into polite society as someone fresh and new. She lived to marry and bear children; she died of old age.

Who can stop the mind, though, from conjuring up images of Anne's last night? The house would have had only a few windows, left open after a hot August day. Then it came. The sound of glass crashing, the pounding footsteps of the invaders, the children's cries, all were mixed with a sight we can be certain of—the enraged Anne standing her ground as she ordered her killers to leave in the name of God.

Revealing the Vision

To the earliest settlers in New England, God was giving humanity a second chance. The moral rottenness of Europe could be left behind for an unspoiled landscape that was extravagantly called a new Eden. It thrilled the souls of these radical Protestants to be rewriting the fall of humankind. They had complained bitterly about the corruption of the Catholic and Anglican churches, although their zeal for purity in all things had made them the butt of ridicule, including by Shakespeare. (A character in *Twelfth Night* mocks, “Dost thou think because thou art virtuous there shall be no more cakes and ale?”) Yet this fervent optimism ran into several crushing obstacles that spoiled the apple. Not a serpent, but stubborn human nature and the trials of bleak New England winters came as crushing blows to some Puritans, while others turned flint hard and scraped out a bare living that was more like God’s punishment than a reward. The deity was not allowing an easy birth for the new Adam and Eve.

We don’t live in a world where Satan is watching if you go to the movies. Our souls are not in peril when we indulge in a hot fudge sundae. But the Puritans felt keenly that the enticements of pleasure were created to tempt the righteous to fall. The first Massachusetts colonists were overwhelmed by new settlers with different, more lenient beliefs, but the old Puritan strain, with its prudery, guilt, hellfire, and damnation, stuck in the collective mind. The New World was indelibly marked as puritan, with or without a capital *P*.

We cannot look upon the Bay Colony as a grim curiosity. Salvation lies at the heart of being a Protestant. Anne Hutchinson, like everyone around her, believed that God was intimately near. Under his gaze, every soul was naked. It was up to each believer, then, to enter into a soul bargain with the Lord, and the bargain could turn fatal at any moment. The slippery slope to hell was much easier to find than the steep stairway to heaven. From our easy vantage point, the setup was a kind of abusive relationship, since the Father’s love could only be kept by acting the part of a perfect child, no

matter how often God became enraged and visited random punishments without giving a reason for them.

Punishment in the first years of the Pilgrim settlement wasn't random—it was constant, and the more people perished from starvation or the mysterious malady recorded as “the sickness,” the more rigid the mind-set became that looked for sin as the cause of misfortune. Anne Hutchinson shared with everyone a belief that reading the “book of Creation” would reveal signs of inner failure and weakness.

She would be the perfect martyr if we didn't have the transcript of the 1637 trial in which a kangaroo court ensured that their local gadfly was banished. Everything condemned by the old guard in Boston (remembering that “old” meant landing in the New World four years ahead of anyone else) became revered in American history. Tolerance, however imperfect, replaced sectarian bigotry. Free speech became a right written into the Constitution. Eventually the rise of the women's movement made Anne look even better.

Unfortunately, we do have the trial record, which reveals that the defendant was either delusional, a fanatic, or seriously misguided in her spiritual quest. Hearing Anne curse the judges who were about to condemn her meant, in the eyes of Puritans, that she wished eternal damnation upon them. Not the picture of a gentle prophetess guided by Jesus whom we might like to embrace. But a woman who came out publicly to announce that she heard the voices of Moses, Christ, John the Baptist, and the Antichrist would be greeted just as hostilely today as she was then. How can we revere revelation and be deeply suspicious of it at the same time?

This was a crucial dilemma for the whole movement known as Protestantism. The endless—and to our eyes pointless—battles over heresies, the gruesome persecution of witches, and the splitting off of contentious new sects prove that an intimate relationship with God is two-edged. If you are the sole authority of God's word, no other authority can deny your truth. Going back to the earliest days of Christianity, it appears that knowing God directly, which was called

Gnosticism, was probably part of the faith during the decades right after the crucifixion. So were the tendencies that burned in Anne Hutchinson's heart: resistance to authority, the right of women to preach, and a hunger for revelation.

As the official church rose, it set itself against Gnosticism, and when the emperor Constantine put the imperial seal on Christianity as the state religion in 313, one of the first campaigns of the early bishops was to wipe out the Gnostic heresy—in fact, for centuries all that was known about the Gnostics came from the fervent condemnation of their enemies. Power politics has never found a way to keep its fingers out of religion, as Anne Hutchinson discovered, with fatal consequences. Yet gnosticism with a small g, the belief that God can be contacted by anyone, can never be extinguished.

A passage in the New Testament contains the seed of trouble. In the Americanized King James Version, 1 John 4:9 sounds innocuous: “In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him.” But the first phrase can also be translated, “In this was manifested the love of God in us.” Christianity has worried over what “God in us” means. Anne Hutchinson took it to mean that the Holy Spirit was equally in everyone, a message that recurs among all the world's mystics. But sin exists in all people too according to the tradition stemming from the fall of Adam and Eve. So how do the two poles of good and evil relate in our divided nature? This is a question that extends far beyond the curious, grim band of Puritans struggling to survive in the wilderness.

Somehow Christ's death, which redeemed the world of sin, didn't wipe sin out. This fact is apparent to the naked eye, yet to believing Christians, all murder and violence that followed the crucifixion is different from the murder and violence that preceded it. The difference is salvation. By surrendering to God through his Son, your sins are forgiven and your soul redeemed. Thus the death of a single individual marked a turning point in the history of the world. Non-Christians

accept no such turning point, but that's in the nature of religions, to mark exclusive territory for their version of God. The Christian God is waiting for sinners to take advantage of a cosmic bargain that defeats all evil for all time; the choice is ours.

For the Puritans, the cosmic bargain was so palpably real that they began to examine it under a microscope, reading the finest of fine print. (The faction represented by John Winthrop even called itself the Legalists.) How was the contract fulfilled? Did you accept God's word at face value or did he have to prove that he accepted you? Was a newborn baby, always in danger of dying very quickly, an unredeemed sinner, or would baptism take care of that? If not baptism, then what? Because the cosmic bargain was written in invisible ink, these minute but life-altering details became rife in Protestantism long before the Puritans sailed.

Just as Europe had splintered over theological niceties, the American colonists continued to divide, and out of the original meager settlements tiny bands of renegades melted into the forest to found new towns from Maine to New York, all wanting to breathe their own air and worship their own version of the Protestant God. We shake our heads today that anyone was willing to risk starvation and death over a delusional issue like infant damnation, but when your soul is at risk, such niceties lead to eternal damnation, should you forget to obey the fine print.

Anne Hutchinson set herself against legalism with breathtaking certainty. She declared that "laws, commands, rules, and edicts" existed only for those who were blind to the light. The path to salvation was clear to "he who has God's grace in his heart." She emerges on the "good" side of the fanatical struggle, but her plea for grace didn't actually win. One person would never be enough, however holy her life, to convince the world that sin was entirely forgiven simply by knowing it inside. What actually triumphed was Winthrop's conviction that you have to work hard to earn God's favor—this was the doctrine of "sanctification"—which to him was a

self-evident truth. If you didn't work hard, you would certainly fall into ruin, and that could hardly be a sign that God loves you. Therefore, even if you don't feel saved or particularly favored by Providence, your hard work proves that you are willing to strive toward salvation. Faith found a visible outlet. As the Protestant work ethic prevailed (interestingly, the phrase is synonymous with "Puritan work ethic"), John D. Rockefeller Jr., the world's first self-made billionaire, could take triumphant advantage. When asked where he got his riches, Rockefeller smoothly bypassed his ruthless business tactics, which led to the ruin of many competitors, by saying, "God gave me my money."

Anne Hutchinson can't be seen as victorious, but she is representative of a division that troubles human nature. Faith remains invisible, no matter how many good works we do, including charity and selfless altruism. This implies that God hasn't retracted the curse laid on Adam and Eve. Guilt has shifted, however, becoming a psychological issue rather than a religious one. Still, in times of crisis, the possibility of an angry God always rears its head, and too often violence in the name of appeasing God breaks out. What can please God more than attacking his enemies, who are obliged to return the favor since they believe in their own version of God?

Where does that leave grace? Perhaps where it always was, as a private communication between God and each person's inner world. Anne Hutchinson died a violent death, and it's not hard to imagine her enemies feeling justified—the heretic got the divine punishment she deserved. But the secret of grace is that they never would have known whether they were right. Grace, if truly received, brings complete peace. The path of hard work, on the other hand, never loses its anxious worry; the instant God is seen as demanding something, he might never be satisfied. In the harsh climate of Puritanism, Anne Hutchinson spoke severely:

One may preach a covenant of grace more clearly than another. . . . But when they preach a covenant of works for salvation, that is not truth.

Many of the world's wisdom traditions agree with her. As for those that don't, they inherit an anxious existence that turns faith in God into a risky gamble.

9

Baal Shem Tov

“To Live Is to Serve God”

Avraham Gershon, son of a great rabbi, couldn't believe that God was so clumsy. His timing was terrible. There was no other word for it.

“Wait for a proper man, a man who has something to give. You can't marry this nebbish. I forbid it,” he fumed.

His sister, Chanah, was distressed. Hands folded in her lap, she kept her gaze on the floor. “He's a teacher, and people love him, they say.” She hadn't actually set eyes on Yisrael, although she had been told the name of her betrothed.

“Love?” Avraham snorted. “Tell me, how do you make soup out of that? I won't give him any money, be sure of it.”

Avraham stared out the window. By the Christian calendar it was 1716. Spring was breaking in Poland. The czar couldn't take that away from the Jews.

Chanah was meek-voiced, but stubborn. “So I must obey you before I obey my father? Where is it written?”

“Our father is dead,” snapped Avraham. “He meets this nobody while traveling to preach in the *shtetls*. He foolishly promises his daughter's hand, and then what does our father do? He eats a chicken leg, feels a bit off, and dies in the night. Ridiculous.”

The old rabbi had gone to the outlying villages, the *shtetls*, because there had been an outbreak of messiah fever. A movement, in fact. He went to talk sense to the people, especially the ignorant, who couldn't read or write. Some had started to worship a dead rabbi from the Ukraine, whispering that miracles were done in his name. But instead of breaking

the fever, their father must have gotten infected. It was some kind of joke, really, or a trial. After he returned home, all he would say was that he had given Chanah to Yisrael ben Eliezer.

The groom-to-be, who was poor as a turnip digger, was due that afternoon. The day was ominously bright. He'd be on time and smiling. Why not? His bride was one of the choicest catches in the prosperous town of Brody.

Avraham glowered. "And don't talk to me about what is written. A woman—an unmarried woman, in fact—has no right to speak of the law to a man."

Avraham had his back to his sister, and when she didn't argue, he felt a flicker of hope that she might listen to him. But when he turned around, she had already crept out of the room. He could have ordered her back. Until she married and became the responsibility of her husband, she was under the authority of her brother. Avraham sighed. He wasn't a monster. He wanted her to be happy.

Like other prominent Jewish families they kept a goyishe maid, a Christian, who did the chores on the Sabbath, when all work was forbidden to Jews. The girl lit candles, sliced the bread, even opened and shut doors. This one, named Marya, entered. A man was at the kitchen door, a peasant who wouldn't leave, although the cook had dumped some slops on his feet.

Avraham almost ordered the peasant to be beaten from the door, but he stopped himself. A righteous man is weakened by anger. If he performed an act of charity, he reminded himself, some good might come of it. With old Rebbe Ephraim dead, his congregation was subject to poachers. The fickle were already drifting away. The rabbinical court that Avraham had inherited settled fewer lawsuits. The familiar noise of wives weeping over their faithless husbands and neighbors accused of stealing eggs had quieted down. The silence made Avraham nervous. He went to the back door, fumbling for a zloty to give as alms.

The beggar was a young man, under twenty, who wore shabby clothes, but didn't smell. Avraham held out the coin, hoping he wasn't showing charity to a drunkard.

The beggar smiled. "Reb' Gershon?"

"How do you know my name?"

"Shouldn't I know it if we are going to be related?"

Smiling more broadly, the beggar opened his arms. Avraham involuntarily stumbled backward.

Not to be rebuffed, the beggar saw an opening and slipped past his future brother-in-law into the kitchen. "The road. It's hard on the feet," he said cheerfully. Since he wore no shoes and had walked to Brody with his feet wrapped in rags, this remark made sense.

"What is that smell—noodle pudding, kugel?" he asked.

"The road. It's harder on the stomach," said Avraham drily. "We were expecting you. Only not quite like this."

"I know, I know," said the groom-to-be apologetically, unable to take offense. He turned to the cook, who was fumbling with her greasy apron, unsure how to react to the intruder, who was clapping his arms around himself to get warm.

"I forgive you for dumping cabbage scraps on me. What's your name? I am Yisrael ben Eliezer, and it would be a blessing to find out how well you make kugel."

Avraham jerked on the young man's arm. "It doesn't matter what her name is. You'll get fed in time. Come."

Yisrael rubbed the soles of his feet against his pants legs, to wipe off the layer of mud caked on them. He followed Avraham into a parlor filled with warmth from a crackling hearth. The visitor seemed awed. What were the walls lined with? It could be silk. Instead of walking immediately toward the fire, Yisrael ben Eliezer closed his eyes, and his smile assumed a different, unusual shape. Praying? Avraham

Gershon couldn't believe it. This nobody was thanking God for the existence of a working fireplace.

"Before you ask, she's not coming down. It's not a match," said Avraham firmly.

"That's too bad. I heard about your father's death, peace be on his memory." Yisrael's tone was sympathetic, as if he hadn't heard the bad news about not getting his hands on Chanah's dowry.

"Oh, I almost forgot," he said, reaching into his leather coat, which was patched and stained. He brought out a small bag tied with string. "What do you think of that?"

Avraham frowned. "What is it?"

"Seeds. For planting. By God's mercy none of the village wheat got moldy over the winter."

With a humble but ceremonious gesture Yisrael handed the bag to his host.

"You're in a town. We buy flour. We don't plant wheat," said Avraham slowly, as if addressing an idiot.

"Isn't it time someone did? Not you, of course, but the wretched poor. I saw them on the way into town. There are Jews with nothing to eat living in the shadow of the synagogue," said Yisrael, his voice growing sober.

The house was not so big that two men's voices didn't carry upstairs. There were light footsteps outside the parlor, and before Avraham could keep the groom-to-be from setting eyes on her, Chanah appeared. Yisrael grinned as if he'd seen the gates of paradise fly open.

"I am Yisrael," he managed to stutter.

Chanah said nothing, blankly staring. Her brother began to cheer up. The groom-to-be was obviously not a promising sight, particularly when he turned around and took off his traveling coat. His black suit was so old it looked shiny enough to see your reflection in.

“Yisrael thinks it would be a good idea to plant crops around the synagogue,” Avraham remarked brightly.

“What?” muttered Chanah.

Their visitor coughed lightly. “Not quite, dear brother. I think it would improve the lot of Jews starving in town to move to farms where they could raise food. Their children are dying. It would be better all around.” Yisrael turned shyly to Chanah. “Do you agree?”

Avraham inserted himself before his sister could reply. “She has no opinion on the matter. None at all.”

His rudeness was miscalculated. Chanah took pity on her shabby suitor and stepped forward. She told him her name. Yisrael beamed. Dinner that night was sturgeon soup and latkes, an uncomfortable affair as Avraham sulked. Yisrael slurped down the broth without any etiquette. In between he talked enthusiastically about the plight of the Jews in the rural countryside.

“Your father was on a righteous mission, in his own mind. The messiah, here in Poland? Of course in the shtetl one hears about this miracle rabbi all the time. He has a growing following.”

“What’s his name?” asked Chanah, who had to fill in the gaps while her brother, keeping the wine to himself, stared at his glass before refilling it.

“Sabbatai Zevi. He was considered very holy. I wish I had been alive to see him.”

“What good is there setting eyes on a charlatan, or perhaps this Zevi was even mad,” muttered Avraham.

Yisrael bent over his soup. “You never can tell,” he said mildly.

“Wouldn’t we know if the messiah had come?” asked Chanah.

Yisrael shrugged. “Nothing says that he would know himself. God hides the truth as much as he reveals it.”

Even though his brain was foggy, a light struck Avraham. “You didn’t encourage our father in this madness, did you? No, it was you. It had to be.” Avraham lurched to his feet. “And now you dare come here?”

“Brother!” cried Chanah.

“Stay out of it. I work night and day to convince people that Ephraim of Brody wasn’t out of his mind. A great man suddenly babbles about the messiah? If he picked this bag of bones to marry you, he must have lost his reason entirely.”

“Where I live, almost everyone goes hungry. Is that a sin?” asked Yisrael quietly.

“I wouldn’t know,” snapped Avraham. “Ask God why you suffer. Ask your false messiah, why don’t you?”

After throwing down his napkin and carelessly tipping his glass over, Avraham stalked out. He banged upstairs. In the ensuing silence Chanah looked thoughtful.

“What did happen to our father? Can you tell me?”

“I’m not sure I’m permitted. But I could tell you once we’re married,” said Yisrael. “Husband and wife are one.” Despite the disturbance, he didn’t push his plate away, but kept eating. There was little doubt he hadn’t seen such a meal for a long time.

“You make it sound like a dreadful secret,” said Chanah.

“It’s a secret, but not dreadful. More joyful, I would say.” Yisrael looked around hopefully, and Chanah rang the bell. They might as well bring in the noodle pudding, even if she couldn’t eat a bite. Her nerves were frayed, yet she felt as if the world had suddenly turned on its axis.

Here was a very unpromising groom-to-be, who couldn’t eat properly at a table. But Chanah had heard a secret from her father that wasn’t shared with Avraham. Utterly impoverished, Yisrael yet was beloved of villagers because he could heal in the name of God. Such a rabbi was called Baal Shem for his miraculous works. It wasn’t for table manners that the great

Ephraim of Brody had selected Chanah's husband. He saw him with the eyes of the soul.

Every word that a Baal Shem said was of utmost importance, and Chanah did her best to grasp wisdom from Yisrael's ordinary remarks, not because she respected him—she hardly knew him—but because she was committed to following her father's wishes. This was to be her husband, even if his secret, once revealed, were a good deal less than joyful.

Avraham kept his word. After driving Yisrael from his house, he disowned his sister and refused to give her a penny. Chanah kept her promise to God and her father. She wed the Baal Shem under the canopy with no one present who knew her, much less willing to give her away.

She had shamed Avraham and their family, but he relented slightly at the end.

“Your husband goes around town dressed like a peasant,” he said, “and if that's his life, he needs a horse.”

So they started out their new existence with a horse as their only worldly possession. The first few years were spent in grinding poverty. Yisrael was reduced to manual labor, digging clay to be made into bricks. Chanah found a wagon to hitch the horse to and made deliveries to even poorer families who had no horse at all.

And the secret was revealed, almost as soon as they had slept with the marriage sheet between them and Yisrael had deflowered his bride without seeing her.

“Do you remember when I made your brother so angry, talking about the news of a messiah?” he asked. Chanah nodded. “I said, ‘You never can tell,’ and he stormed out of the room. I had a reason for those words.”

Chanah felt faint. She was cold in her wedding bed, in a rickety hut where the wind whistled through the walls, and suddenly a feeling of loneliness overcame her. It would be too

much if Yisrael believed the messiah had come. Couldn't he wait to tell her in the morning?

Seeing her distress, Yisrael went silent. They lay there as he stroked her cheek, but it was only a short pause.

"Be easy. I am not in the messiah movement, but I do have secret beliefs."

What he unfolded was strange to Chanah. It had to do with mystic Judaism, Kabbalah. Nothing about that made her anxious. Avraham was considered an authority on Kabbalah, which was widespread in that region.

"The Jews cannot be abandoned by God," her brother declared. "He has left us messages about our fate. The messages are hidden, that's all."

Chanah was used to getting up in the middle of the night and spying her brother, bent over in the dark with a sputtering candle by his side, poring over the Talmud, searching for secret numbers and codes. It wasn't her place to think about such things, but now she had no choice. It helped that her husband's arms were warm when he wrapped them around her.

"God has every reason to destroy the world," Yisrael said. "Have you ever wondered why he doesn't? There is enough sin, even among the good Jews, to make God abandon the human race. This problem worried me very much as I grew up.

"The answer doesn't lie out in the open, like hay drying in the sun. It must be hidden on purpose, and if so, where can it hide? In the hearts of those who know."

"And you are one of those?" asked Chanah.

"If anyone asks whether I am one of them, I can only say what I told your brother: you never can tell. The secret is buried that deep."

"This makes no sense. Anyone who keeps a secret knows that he is keeping it," Chanah objected.

"Not this kind."

Begging her to be patient, the Baal Shem unfolded a cosmic scheme. As he delved into Kabbalah, the young Yisrael discovered the most mystical number, which was thirty-six. Why? Because it has been revealed that thirty-six righteous men have been appointed by God to keep the world from being destroyed. Exactly that number, no more and no less.

“The Lamed Vav,” said Yisrael. “You must remember this. Our whole life together depends upon it.”

It seemed like something a child could remember, since *lamed* was the thirtieth letter of the Hebrew alphabet and *vav* was the sixth. *Why would a grown man be obsessed with—?*

Yisrael cut off the thought before she finished thinking it. “When do we know for certain that God spoke? In the Torah, when the world first began. Our fathers heard the truth from God’s mouth. For example, when Sodom had fallen into depravity, God raised his hand to wipe it out and everyone who lived within its walls. But Abraham beseeched God to save the people. God agreed on one condition, that Abraham find fifty righteous men in Sodom. Abraham searched the city in vain, and when he couldn’t find fifty, he begged God to change his demand. God then asked for only ten righteous men, yet even then there were not ten to be found. He asked for only one righteous man, and he was found, by the name of Lot.”

“And still Sodom was destroyed,” Chanah reminded him.

Yisrael was too excited to be interrupted. “What matters is that God found a way to keep the human race alive. He is doing the same thing today. Has sin decreased? Has the messiah come to save us? No, so we must save ourselves. That is what the thirty-six, the Lamed Vav, are doing. In secret they are the righteous men who keep God’s wrath at bay. Isn’t it wonderful?”

Chanah thanked the Lord that Yisrael hadn’t blurted out these ideas when he lived under Avraham’s roof courting her. The last thing she needed was two Kabbalists fighting over who had the magic number. She went to sleep exhausted, but

happy. If this was her husband's joyful secret, it wasn't hard to keep and nothing to be ashamed of.

She soon found that the secret was far from private. The Baal Shem, although only eighteen years old, had a fervent following. They called themselves "the righteous," and they all accepted his belief that the thirty-six must exist, secretly and unknown to anyone else, or else the world would end. It might be a strange belief, but it was all they talked about; therefore, it was all that Chanah heard.

One July day she was scrubbing clothes by the river. It was a scorching day; she was bent over a rock squeezing soap out of the heavy washing. There wasn't an extra penny to hire a peasant girl to do the drudgery, as they had in her father's house. To any passerby, Chanah herself looked like a peasant girl.

The woman next to her kept babbling about the thirty-six, until Chanah blurted out, "What good do they do us? We are two penniless Jews thrashing clothes against the rocks. This is salvation?"

Word got back to the Baal Shem, naturally. Chanah knew it would, and she braced herself. Whatever he threw at her, she was determined to throw it back. He came in that evening and sat down at the table without a word; he kept silent as she ladled out the watery cabbage soup and cut the black bread.

They ate like that, saying nothing, but not anxiously. Chanah knew her husband well, and he wasn't angry. She waited for his reaction.

Halfway through, Yisrael smiled. "I don't slurp, have you noticed? That was one of the three promises I made when you married me. This girl was brought up in a nice home. She doesn't deserve slurping."

Chanah knew he was getting at things sideways, so she played into the game. "And what were your other two promises?"

“To love my dear wife and to keep her safe. Only I can’t keep you safe.”

The Baal Shem pointed out the open door, which let the breeze in since their hut had no windows. “Out there are enemies. The czar to the east, the Germans to the west. If I ride a horse three days from here, what do I see? A burned-out land where the Turks have killed everyone. The Turks! They crossed the whole Black Sea to find some Jews and wipe them out.”

Chanah bit her lip, never having heard him in such a dark mood.

“I know that God wants to keep us safe, and I know I am too weak to help. That was why He sent the vision of the thirty-six to me, so that I would not lose heart. I would see that he knows everything and his children are cared for.”

“But I thought you were one of the thirty-six,” said Chanah. “Your followers worship you. I just assumed.”

“I’m sorry, but no. The Lamed Vav are hidden among us. They never reveal themselves. They may not even know their holy mission. All they know is that God wants them to lead the holiest life possible. To live is to serve God. This has been revealed to them in their hearts.”

Although she was listening, Chanah couldn’t help smiling to herself. Her husband worked night and day to get people to believe in the thirty-six, and he wasn’t even one of them! He had taken on a thankless, foolish task. She saw that clearly. The only redeeming feature was that maybe it was a task that God had willed.

As Chanah grew used to her life, God played a new trick. Her brother, moved by his sister’s poverty, agreed to set Yisrael up in business, but the business Avraham chose was tavern keeping. This was not permitted for a Jew and totally opposite to the righteous life Yisrael set for his followers. But the Baal Shem shrugged off these objections, saying that it was in the

spirit of the law to show kindness to everyone, including sots and the morally weak.

Tongues were set wagging for other reasons. “The rebbe and his wife, they are still like newlyweds,” the gossips whispered behind Chanah’s back. “He keeps her up all night, can you imagine?”

This was true, but not in the sense they meant. The Baal Shem prayed long into the night. Chanah got out of bed barefoot and came to him with a candle in hand.

“What are you asking for, night after night?”

“Nothing.”

“How can that be?” she asked.

“I want to leave myself and go where God is. If I pray with enough love, he lets me into that place, and then everything is perfect.” He smiled innocently. “Forgive me. I must sound very selfish to you.”

“It can’t be selfish to seek God,” she said. Sometimes before she left Chanah would kiss her husband on the forehead or touch his chest. His skin would be hot if he had prayed long enough. He called this “the burning,” a bodily sign that he was in a state of ecstasy.

Their life was lived so close to the bone that Chanah kept wondering how he could pray without asking God for a small boon or relief from suffering. She embraced her own private thoughts. For instance, she thought that her husband should ask God directly if he was one of the thirty-six. Wasn’t it better to know, once and for all? But if she hinted at such doubts, Yisrael shook his head and refused to discuss the matter.

As he grew older, a gift came to him, and to all the Jews in that region, which shifted between Poland and the Ukraine, depending on which ruler was greedy enough to fight for it.

“The government needs us now,” the Baal Shem told his followers. “The Turks have been driven out, and the land they

invaded was devastated. They killed everyone they could find and left them to rot in the streets.”

He caught himself and turned to Chanah. “I’m sorry if you would prefer not to hear this.”

Whatever she might have preferred, the men in the group shuffled their feet, and Chanah knew she wasn’t wanted. The Baal Shem told her later that the region in question, Podolia, having been depopulated by the invaders, was in sore need of farmers to move in. The Polish authorities were taking a lenient view and invited the Jews to settle.

“You see how God looks out for us?” said Yisrael. “Land for poor Jews, but even better, a place for new ideas.”

This new land became seed ground for his followers, who became known as the Hasidim. The name meant that they were pious, but also loving and kind. Is human nature so easily changed that each Hasid was suddenly a saint? Their skeptics were not convinced, but the peasants began to trade tales about the Baal Shem. He went to any house where there was sickness and provided herbs and a holy message to fold inside an amulet. These were mystic names of God that could heal.

Avraham took note when he traveled to visit his sister. “So, your husband was playing a part with his shiny black suit. There’s a magical creature behind his humility. A miracle rabbi, they say. You must be proud.”

At that moment the Baal Shem walked into the room. “Pride is the only sin that is unforgivable. We know this from the fallen angels, no?”

Avraham didn’t want to start a fight. He rode around the countryside, and the ignorance of the Jews who had come in from everywhere—Russia, Poland, the Ukraine—amazed him.

“All I hear is messiahs and miracles. The most preposterous tales are circulated. Is this fairyland?”

What he said wasn’t pure prejudice. Somehow, by being released from the oppression of the towns, these Jews had released their fantastic imagination. Every fallen tree that

blocked the road could be the mischief of a golem or dybbuk, unholy spirits walking the land. Eggs that failed to hatch were the work of gremlins, and when winter was dark and deep, ghosts were spied dancing among the snowflakes.

“You encourage these superstitions?” Avraham accused the Baal Shem.

“What should I do instead?” Yisrael replied.

“Don’t pretend with me. You know what makes us Jews. One and only one thing—the law. Without the law, we would have disappeared from the face of the earth.”

“Then let me ask you,” said the Baal Shem quietly. “Has anyone ever loved the law?”

Avraham was stymied. The words “love” and “law” didn’t belong together. God didn’t mean them to, which went to show how nearly insane the Baal Shem must be. As he parted, Avraham told Chanah that he pitied her, but could no longer protect her.

“Mark my words. Pious Jews should leave this place. Here the Talmud has died,” he declared.

Avraham was right in his world, where the law, as interpreted by generations of scholars, made the Talmud a lifeline to God. In its books were preserved every wise and holy thought that was lawful. But there is another kind of lifeline, which has nothing to do with the law. People can believe in legends that uplift their hearts. Something precious is thereby kept alive.

“You never can tell” had turned into a useful philosophy as the Baal Shem gradually became enveloped in myth. When he left a farm or shtetl, wisps of legend trailed behind. A fox broke into the henhouse, but instead of biting a chicken on the neck, he saw a mezuzah nailed to the doorpost. Suddenly the fox started to pray, and he left without snatching even a chick.

“You see? The Baal Shem told me to nail a mezuzah to the henhouse, and I had no idea why. Now I know,” said the

farmer with a knowing nod of the head. True? You never can tell.

As his fame spread, the Baal Shem moved from one place to another, doing good works and gathering disciples. But at home he never seemed to change, and since women did not attend the prayer house, Chanah had little notion of her husband's reputation. It astonished her to get up some mornings to find offerings left at their door—a bunch of wild roses, a loaf of festive challah.

“Wouldn't it be a sin if they are starting to worship you?” she worried.

“Cut the bread, put the flowers in a vase,” he said. “We might as well have something nice while I pray to God for an answer.”

Yet it wasn't these offerings that made Chanah uneasy so much as the awe that everyone showed around the Baal Shem. There was no question of offending God. The Hasids lived up to their name as pious men, and even their worst enemies couldn't fault them, since the Baal Shem demanded the strictest observance of prayers and rituals.

Unable to shake off her nagging curiosity, Chanah wondered which of the men she could question without being found out. One day after Sabbath, the Baal Shem emerged from the prayer house trailed by his disciples. It was his custom to take a pleasant drive into the country to break the Sabbath, and Chanah was waiting with her best shawl around her shoulders. On this day, however, he didn't greet her. Calling for a wagon large enough to hold all of his immediate followers, her husband gave Chanah a nod that told her nothing, and off the men went, leaving her behind.

They returned late the next night. Chanah was waiting up to hear the whole story, but the Baal Shem kissed her on the forehead, saying, “I know what is in your heart. Just this once, seek out the youngest follower, who is barely a boy, and tell him it is no shame to satisfy your curiosity.”

The next morning Chanah ran off to find a boy named David, who had just celebrated his bar mitzvah the week before. Considering himself a man, he was reluctant to tell tales about the Master, but after a good deal of persuasion, he unfolded the story.

The men had gathered as usual to celebrate the beginning of the Sabbath together. Out of respect for the Baal Shem, the atmosphere was quiet and restrained.

“I’m sure you know,” said David, “that he reads the secret workings of the world. He knows why things happen and what is the will of God. So even the slightest gesture of the Baal Shem contains mystery within mystery.”

Chanah, who certainly did not know this, concealed her surprise and asked for more of the tale.

As the Baal Shem was about to say the prayer over the wine, he suddenly burst out laughing. This wasn’t a mild chuckle, but a full, deep laugh that startled all of the disciples. They waited for an explanation, but the Master resumed the prayer, only to burst out a second time, and then, when this eruption subsided, a third. Everyone sat there dumbstruck, but no explanation was given, and the rest of the Sabbath proceeded as if nothing unusual had happened.

Upon setting foot outside the prayer house the next day near the end of the Sabbath, however, the Baal Shem said, “Come.” He called for a wagon, and they all piled in. Only instead of a pleasant ride, the journey took all night, during which the Baal Shem said nothing. The next morning they arrived at a nondescript village.

As soon as the Master set foot outside the wagon, all the Jews knew that something important was happening. The elders rushed up in a pack and asked to what they owed such a surprise visit.

The Baal Shem looked them over, and said, “I know you are good Jews, but the one I need to see is Shabti.”

“Shabti the bookbinder?” asked the lead elder. “He’s a simple soul with no learning. He crawls between heaven and earth without anybody noticing.”

Somewhat offended, the elders sent for Shabti, who arrived cap in hand. “I know that I sinned on the Sabbath,” he confessed. “How you should know it is beyond me, but tell me what penance I must do to atone, and I will obey your judgment.”

The Baal Shem waved his hand. “Before we get to that, tell everyone what happened.”

Stammering and red-faced, Shabti began. “God be thanked, I’ve earned a living all my life, never having to ask anyone for anything. My only goal is that on the fifth day of the week I have money for my wife to go out and buy what she needs for the Sabbath—flour, fish, candles. But as you see, I bear the weight of old age, and last week I had nothing to give her, not a penny even to keep a light on the table.

“I sighed and resolved that God wanted me to fast this Sabbath. So be it. I told my wife that she must wait for me at home while I went to prayers. We have good neighbors with kind hearts. They would see no light from our house, and then they would run over to offer candles and bread and the rest. But I won’t take alms. I ordered my wife not to accept charity, and when she promised me, I went off to prayers with a heavy heart.”

Shabti was so devout that he began his prayers at the tenth hour of the day before the Sabbath and went home after sundown the next day. Walking home in the dark, he saw a light in the window, and as he entered, the smell of fresh bread and baked sturgeon filled his nose.

His wife stood there with a glowing face and, it being the Sabbath, Shabti didn’t have the heart to be angry with her. She had shown a woman’s weakness and taken alms. He sat down to pray over the wine when she spoke up.

“This is the most splendid holiday we’ve had in years. The wine seller was astonished when I asked for his best bottle,” she exclaimed.

Shabti couldn’t restrain himself and was about to rebuke her, when his wife threw her hands up. She hadn’t disobeyed him at all. Instead, when she was left alone in the house with only half a candle left, his wife decided to clean everything from top to bottom, as seemed suitable before fasting. She chanced upon an old chest full of yellowed clothes, remnants of the innocent years when they were newlyweds.

“Who would think? I lifted a tattered blouse imagining that I might still be able to smell a trace of perfume on it,” she said. “Out tumbled a gold button, and I remembered losing it long ago. I rushed off to the goldsmith, who said that it was very fine work, the kind of work nobody does nowadays. He gave me so many coins for it. What do you say—a miracle?”

Shabti was astonished and overjoyed. He started to pray over the wine, but he was so happy that he burst out laughing and whirled his old wife around the room in a dance.

“I knew it was wrong in the eyes of God, but I was so overcome with joy that I did it twice more,” Shabti confessed. “So how bad is my sin, Master?”

“God is offended when we do not feel joy,” said the Baal Shem. “When you laughed out loud, he rejoiced.”

Young David gave Chanah a serious look. “So you see? The Master saw all of this unfold in the secret workings of the world. He was so glad at Shabti’s joy that he burst out laughing three times, every time the bookbinder did.”

Tears came to Chanah’s eyes, and it was hard not to embrace David, but she didn’t want to give away that she had never heard such things about her husband. He, of course, knew what David would tell her. When Chanah returned home, the Baal Shem smiled with the same innocence as ever, accompanied by the familiar shrug. You never can tell.

His fame only grew, until the day he died, barely sixty-two. Chanah had preceded him, or she would have been celebrated the rest of her days. In the Baal Shem's eyes, he was surrounded by good Jews, each one a recipient of his mystical blessing, a ray of light sent from God through the Baal Shem's soul.

He never asked for veneration. "What have I done? The sun didn't exactly stop in the sky. And God has sent a messiah to laugh at me."

Just before Baal Shem's death, a strange figure had sprung up in that region, a miracle rabbi named Jacob Frank. He formed a cult around himself, declaring that he was the messiah. He traveled with a gaudy retinue who were styled as his twelve disciples.

So the Hasids found themselves caught between the Talmudists on one side and the Frankists on the other. They were too mystical for one camp of enemies and not mystical enough for the other. The sparkling new messiah made a spectacle of himself in all the villages that had once stood in awe of the Baal Shem. It got to the point where Frank, it was said, wanted his followers baptized.

A shocked Hasid ran into the aged Baal Shem's house to tell him this terrible scandal. The Master took it philosophically.

"What the Jews will believe and what they won't," he murmured. "Has there ever been another question?"

Revealing the Vision

For the Christian world, the arrival of the Messiah changed the course of history, which will lead inexorably to an end point on Judgment Day. But the resurrection also influenced the past, since it justified centuries of waiting. Jesus proved that the wait wasn't in vain. Judaism continues to wait, but history doesn't, and so there is mounting tension between modern life and the archaic portrayal of Yahweh in the Bible. God needs to

be kept current. Otherwise, a religion can collapse from within. This problem was met in Judaism through the long tradition of learned commentaries recorded in the Talmud. If scripture didn't comment directly on how to run a business in Berlin or buy from the vegetable stalls in Warsaw, a learned rabbi would fill in the blanks with an interpretation. Law never stopped working.

But where does this leave love?

Updating the rules isn't the same as salvation, or even the same as knowing that God is still paying attention. On that score, reassurance comes from mystics, of which Judaism has its own rich tradition. Mystics reveal God's love here and now, and love is above the law. But can love prevail? This question was most acute for Jewish visionaries like the Baal Shem Tov. He rose at a time of ferment, when social turbulence almost always meant trouble for the Jews—they would be blamed and persecuted as a matter of course. For centuries, ever since the Romans destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem, survival meant strict adherence to the law, and even the Kabbalah, the mystical interpretation of Judaism, belonged within the grasp of learned commentators, not a rural rabbi who lived like a peasant among peasants.

At first the vision of Yisrael ben Eliezer seems cryptic. Even his title is enigmatic. *Baal* means “master,” and *shem tov* means “good name.” Other rabbinical teachers had been given the honorific title of Baal Shem; Tov was added specifically to refer to the founder of Hasidism. His name can be read two ways, as a “master with a good name” or as a “master who practices wonders with the name of God.” The Baal Shem Tov was the most renowned of miracle rabbis, preaching his vision of the Lamed Vav, thirty-six righteous men who kept God from destroying the sinful world, age after age. By association he became one of them, but that wasn't his intent. In fact, since pride was the only unforgivable sin and humility the purest mark of righteousness, the Baal Shem Tov held that anyone who publicly declared himself to be one of the Lamed Vav must be a fraud.

The two false messiahs mentioned in the story did exist at the time, giving us some idea of how tumultuous Eastern Judaism must have been. The Baal Shem Tov set himself firmly against such claims, yet ironically almost everything known about him consists of wonders, miracles, and saintly deeds that are considered legendary. Throughout the illiterate peasant shtetls his name is associated with healings, being saved from disaster, and finding good luck in the midst of misfortune. Always there is the theme of simple faith as the highest virtue. But the legends grew out of an undeniable truth, that myth nourishes the yearning soul. The Tzadikim, the hidden righteous sects, thrived in Polish Judaism, and the Baal Shem Tov exemplifies their kindness and purity.

Beyond the time, however, his vision was panentheistic, embracing God in everything. It also can be accepted as including all faiths, since the thirty-six did not have to be Jewish. Creation glowed with the same divine presence—the light of shekinah as it was known in Hebrew—and even sinners were included. As history unfolded, the Hasidic movement remained ultra-Orthodox. It turned inward, and the universality of the Baal Shem Tov was obscured, if not lost altogether.

Even so, he remains a spiritual icon, a kind of parable anyone can identify with. It is the parable of the wanderer, the lost son who cannot find where he belongs. This was a painful issue for Jews scattered in the Diaspora. To be the chosen people and yet suffer more than people who were not required enormous faith. And there was even stronger pressure to conform to the law, whose rules and rituals bound Jewish identity together. In that sense the Baal Shem Tov wasn't a rebel, but part of the ongoing anxious question about what it means to be Jewish.

To him it meant joy. Hasidism is about the end of anxiety, and in various sayings of the Baal Shem Tov (it is hard to separate the true ones from the fictitious) he repeats how wrong it is for Jews to be discouraged and downcast. His own

illumination made him see the possibility of perfection in everyone:

Your fellow man is your mirror. If your own face is clean, the image you perceive will also be flawless.

The reason he emphasized prayer and total observance was not to conform to the law, but to open a way for purity. The world as reflected in the eyes of a pure soul is perfect; the feeling it arouses is bliss, a sure sign of connection to God. The implication for impurity was just as obvious:

But should you look upon your fellow man and see a blemish, it is your own imperfection that you are encountering—you are being shown what it is that you must correct within yourself.

The Baal Shem Tov was appalled by cynical teachers who pawned off fake miracles, and even more appalled by the rise of a self-proclaimed messiah, Jacob Frank, who eventually went so far overboard that he wanted his followers baptized, like Christians. It's easy to forget that when the New Testament was written, one of its aims was to prove that Jesus of Nazareth was a good rabbi, fulfilling the law rather than breaking it. The Baal Shem Tov appears to reach across such boundaries also, as when he quotes Leviticus:

Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself.
(19:18)

In a broad sense, everyone is a wanderer trying to find a rightful place in the world; the spiritual dimension comes when you ask if your place is to serve God, which implies that “place” is not fixed by your home on earth. In the shtetl, popular teaching was done through familiar analogies. Besides his purely mystical message, the Baal Shem Tov follows in the long tradition of making God human:

When a father punishes his child, the suffering he inflicts on himself is greater than anything experienced

by the child. So it is with God: His pain is greater than our pain.

This wasn't meant as a way of making suffering inevitable. As one can easily understand, there was a strain of Jewish theology that already made suffering inevitable. How could it not, to a people who had been outcasts for over seventeen centuries when Yisrael ben Eliezer was born? Instead, the Baal Shem Tov uplifted the simplest of lives, prefiguring Leo Tolstoy's ideal of the peasant being closest to Christ. The poorest are the servants of God, and the Baal Shem Tov believed that to live was to serve God. Therefore, the poor show everyone else a profound truth:

The wholesome simplicity of the simple Jew touches on the utterly simple essence of God. . . . When you hold a part of the essence, you hold all of it.

For almost anyone today, this is an uncomfortable message. We no longer see the poor as God's beloved children; a gloss of shame and pity covers our eyes when we look on unending poverty. The Baal Shem Tov taught in a different age, still very close to the medieval, where poverty was an inescapable fact of life. After he spent an afternoon scything wheat with the peasants, Tolstoy the nobleman could retreat to tea, a manor house, and velvet cushions. The Baal Shem Tov spent some early years under conditions close to slave labor, and even when famous he never attained real creature comfort.

Panentheism turned the Jewish predicament on its head. Instead of living nowhere, searching in vain for a home, Jews could look around and see the whole cosmos as their true home. In Hasidism, nature constantly delivers messages from God. No event is outside his gaze; nothing should be considered an accident.

Everything is by Divine Providence. If a leaf is turned over by a breeze, it is only because this has been specifically ordained by God.

Naturally, this rings true with the vision of a Puritan like Anne Hutchinson. The Baal Shem Tov founded a movement to purify the faith, and because he desperately needed confirmation from God, an absent deity was inconceivable. God must be watching at all times, sending signals of approval and disapproval via everyday events. Anne Hutchinson was enthusiastic about finding sermons in stones, and so was the Baal Shem Tov.

Even today, when Hasidic communities are tight enclaves all but invisible to the general population, there is a theological bond between them and fundamentalist Christians: the bond of reading God's private telegrams wired directly to the pure of heart. The evolution of God at this stage is more a reminder that he is still paying attention. Each person must decide how to live under the gaze of eternity. Ancient and modern history are linked by that duty.

10

Rabindranath Tagore

“I Am the Endless Mystery”

There was a hue and cry when the Ouija board arrived. The youngest girls in the family squealed with delight, while a housemaid cut the twine and peeled off the brown wrapping paper. It didn't seem strange that such a parcel had come all the way from London to Calcutta. Everything arrived in the post except for cook's daily supplies, which she ran to the market for as the sun rose.

“How many do you cook for, anyway?” the vegetable seller asked as he packed long beans and okra into a sack.

“Don't be nosy,” the cook said tartly.

No one knew what went on behind those walls. Before they reached school age (or before they found a husband, if they were girls), the Tagore children never left the compound.

“Run, run!” the boys cried, galloping down the halls to round up all fourteen children. The youngest, Rabi, didn't run. He remained where he was most days, staring out a grated window at the city he was never allowed to set foot in.

When one of his older brothers, Jyotir, appeared at the door, Rabi turned his head. (Jyotir's full name was Jyotirindranath, just as Rabi's was Rabindranath, but they all used shorter nicknames.)

“What is it, this thing that came?” Rabi asked. He liked hubbub, being a normal boy. But a natural reserve kept him from joining in.

Jyotir was beside himself. “A telephone line to the dead! Can you believe it?”

With that kind of buildup, it was impossible to resist the new thing, although it was disappointing to look at, a flat varnished board about the size of a serving tray on which large letters and numerals were painted. No matter. Rabi knew exactly which of the dead he wanted to talk to. The hours passed slowly. It was a lucky day, though; their father, Debendranath Tagore, who was rich, would come home in the evening before leaving again on one of his endless trips.

If only he knew more about the scene he left behind when he stepped out the door. It's a misfortune when a child falls prey to cruelty. The misfortune doubles when cruelty comes masked with a lie. It's always the same lie: "This is for your own good."

Behind his father's back anyone felt free to give Rabi a casual smack. When they held his head underwater in the tin washing tub, the house servants would make sure to lift Rabi up before he blacked out. He sputtered and gasped, wondering why they were smiling.

"You'll thank us one day. We are making you strong," they said. They all took pride in how moral they were, and strict in their religion too.

The boy had good instincts and saw that this was a lie. Little good that did him. The Tagores lived in a huge house, isolated from the outside world behind a high wall, yet the twisted maze didn't mean there was room for escape. Every wing had resentful chambermaids, a bossy governess if a new baby had arrived, overworked sweepers, and outdoor gardeners—there was no end to his punishers. Since the boy was gentle and soft, the blows he received were bewildering as much as painful. But his mother had petted him, so he resolved to show that he wasn't a whiner.

The one kind servant he could hide behind was Kailash, the old groundskeeper who seemed as dusty and worn out as Calcutta itself. Kailash was a joker, always hanging around the gates to tease whoever came and went.

“What a beautiful sister you have,” he’d say when a girl arrived with her wizened grandmother. Or “How perfectly the gods have blessed you,” if a vain middle-aged dandy showed up without the gray hair he had the week before.

As he handpicked fallen leaves off a patch of perfect lawn (kept immaculate to show the colonials that an Indian could out-British the British), Kailash thanked God that he wasn’t a beggar on the streets. He never skipped a daily offering of marigolds to be laid at the feet of the Krishna statue standing with a seductive smile at the back of the garden.

“He protects me. He protects us all,” Kailash explained when Rabi was four and old enough to be curious about everything.

“How?” the boy asked.

“By keeping the demons away, the *rakshasas*.”

Two of the worst *rakshasas*, starvation and disease, roamed just beyond the high wall, and the old part of the city where the mansion stood had become degraded into a place of thievery and prostitution. Rabi didn’t know why Krishna didn’t protect them too, but when he heard shrieks and swearing outside his window at night, there was every reason to make the compound a privileged prison. He clung to Kailash also out of need. His older brothers and sisters were married or at school or surviving on their own. Their father had huge estates to attend to around India, and his travels, which lasted months at a time, created a vacuum.

“It’s a servocracy around here, old man,” Jyotir said, when he found Rabi crouching one day under a palm tree nursing a fresh bruise. Rabi didn’t understand this new word, or why Jyotir laughed, since he had just made it up. But he knew well enough that those on the bottom could royally hate those on the top.

The best thing about hiding behind Kailash was that the old man spun tales that were addictive. When in the mood, he wove garbled romances involving Rama, Sita, and Krishna,

with any passing Western hero—a Galahad here, a Lochinvar there—thrown into the mix. These last came to Kailash’s attention when he lingered under a window while novels were read aloud to the assembled children. Learning was a constant business in the Tagore mansion, stepped up whenever their father came home, since he was a great one for history, astronomy, music, and painting, just to scratch the surface. His talk was a scattershot barrage of facts. Did Rabi know that the year he was born, 1861, Lincoln went to war to free the slaves? It was the same year that the czar freed the serfs in Russia.

Rabi’s head swam. He had never seen a slave or serf. Were they like untouchables? But after hours of studying, he always had an appetite for Kailash’s romances, since the old servant was canny about naming several of the noble princes, swains, and warriors “good Sir Rabindranath.” One tale stuck in Rabi’s mind, about the two epic lovers Prince Rama and his beloved wife, Sita.

“They were rich and beautiful. Life was too good,” Kailash said solemnly, “so Lord Rama was banished to the forest for fourteen years.”

Rabi, who wasn’t interested in filler, said, “Get to the part about the golden deer.”

“There was a deer made of gold, which means that you would starve to death before being able to eat it.”

Rabi stamped his foot. “That’s not the story. You forgot the demon.”

Kailash, whose memory was growing somewhat feeble, suddenly remembered. “Ravana, the king of the demons, set eyes on Sita and fell instantly in love. He wanted her desperately, so he devised a trick. He ordered one of his magical servants to create a golden deer to lure Rama to run after it with his bow and arrow.

“The trick worked. Demons are hateful, but clever. Rama’s brother was Lakshmana, and he was a better brother even than

the ones you have. He had joined the couple in the forest, and now he drew a circle on the ground around Sita.

“Don’t leave this circle,” he ordered. “My duty is to protect you, and while Rama and I chase the golden deer, you will be safe here.”

“She won’t do it,” said Rabi, who enjoyed predicting parts of a tale that he knew by heart.

Kailash sighed. “Too true. When the brothers were gone, Ravana disguised himself as a beggar, crippled and bent over and whining, ‘Oh, kind, kind lady, won’t you give me a scrap to eat?’

“Sita took pity on him and stepped outside the circle. Bang! The king of the demons turned back into himself again. He snatched her up, and off they flew in his magic flying chariot.”

Rabi nodded wisely. “Men will learn to fly soon.”

Kailash shook his head. “Don’t you believe it. That’s the same as asking Ravana to come back again.”

Despite the thrill of Sita’s kidnapping, they both knew that it was only a matter of time before Rama hunted Ravana down to dispatch his ten heads and twenty arms. But one day Rabi refused to hear the tale again. An eavesdropping servant had gotten wind of it, and the next morning he and two others grabbed Rabi out of bed. They drew a chalk circle on the floor and plunked him in the middle.

It was just after dawn, and nature called, but when the boy got up to use the chamber pot, the servants hit him with sticks.

“Be a good little Sita,” they teased. Another trial he kept to himself.

Later that month, the old man Kailash suddenly died of fever. Being seven, Rabi was more curious than grief-stricken. What did it mean to die? Where was Kailash now if not hanging around the gates to joke at the expense of rich people?

And that same evening brought the arrival of carriage lamps, and servants, bidden by Rabi's mother, rushed with torches to unload the master's luggage. Debendranath embraced his wife and looked at their brood with happy satisfaction. His pride in so many sons and daughters was like an iridescent bubble that none of them wanted to burst by telling him about the servocracy. He strode into the parlor trailing instructions and promises after him.

"I've planned a trip to a hill station near Nepal. Who wants to go? And we are getting a piano for the Westerners when they come to the house for music. Oh, I have some toffee in my valise. Tell the cook it's not for boiling; we'll eat it after dinner." And so on, each word like a gift dropped from a benign benefactor. The Ouija board was also a gift, but their father raised his eyebrows when he saw it set up neatly on a tea table surrounded with cushions for the children to sit on.

"Ah, that. Did I order it? I must have."

He was such a curiosity seeker that there was no chance he would ignore the supernatural contraption or send it back. The Tagores hurried through supper to cut short the suspense before they telephoned the dead. Rabi was the pet, and his request was honored first.

"Kailash. There's no way he won't have a joke for us. Being dead won't stop him," he said.

His father agreed and sat down before the board, placing his fingers lightly over the planchette, the little device that skated over the board to spell out words as the dead sent them through. The grown children weren't believers and struck poses of knowing boredom. The instruction booklet said that every participant could lay their fingers on the planchette, but their father decided that only Rabi would be permitted at first.

They dimmed the lights and took their places on the scattered cushions. The room, although far from the kitchen, captured the warm smell of saffron and naan bread. Rabi might have grown drowsy if his nerves weren't set on edge.

“What happens now?”

His father screwed up his eyes staring at the instructions in the near darkness. “Call upon one of the dead by name.”

So father and son put on a solemn face, sitting across from each other with their fingers poised on the planchette.

“Kailash, it’s me. Are you there?” Rabi called, addressing the air over his head, the most likely place where heaven might be located.

At first nothing happened, but gradually the planchette started to quiver, and then with surprising speed it moved to the word “Yes” embossed on one corner of the board.

“You moved it on purpose,” accused his father.

“No, I swear,” Rabi blurted out.

“We don’t swear in this house. I believe you. I didn’t move it either. How odd,” his father murmured. “Ask the old rascal a question. What do we have to lose?”

Rabi didn’t hesitate. “What’s it like to be dead?”

The other children laughed, but his father nodded in agreement. What better question could one ask of the dead?

The planchette started moving again, and as it paused over various letters, they realized that Kailash wasn’t going to abridge his answer. Someone ran to fetch pencil and paper. Rabi was too busy calling out letters to group them into words. Suddenly the message was done, and everyone around him was smiling.

“What is it?” he asked.

The paper was passed to him, and it read, WHY SHOULD YOU GET SO CHEAPLY WHAT I HAD TO DIE TO FIND OUT?

“Cheeky monkey,” their father muttered, but behind his amusement Debendranath was a little impressed. The game went on as other children crowded Rabi out of the way. Kailash refused to communicate anything more, and Rabi went to bed that night clutching the paper. It felt to the boy not like

a scrap of scribbled words, but a scrap of his only friend returned to life. Or had Kailash managed to die without dying?

That night Rabi saw an endless ocean in his dreams. A tiny speck bobbed on the waves, which turned out to be a rowboat. Kailash was rowing, looking as dusty and worn out as he had when picking leaves off the lawn, and his passenger was Rabi's mother. He was sure of it, although the woman never fully turned her face to him. The next morning the boy awoke with gummy eyelids, as if it were possible to cry while you were fast asleep.

When he was eleven, Rabi got to see the hill station his father had promised him. They made their way north by slow degrees, stopping at several estates the family owned. As their carriage passed, the local farmers would leave their plows and run up to the road to prostrate themselves in the dust.

“Are you their god?” Rabi asked, but his father didn't reply. He didn't even smile in his indulgent way, which he usually did if the boy asked a clever question.

Up and up the northern roads winded as they neared the Himalayas. Rabi stuck his head out the window, despite the cold April air, breathing in this green world of deep gorges and waterfalls. Dense forest would suddenly break out into vistas of the high peaks. He'd never seen snow, but he could feel it on his shoulder just by staring at the white caps on the mountains.

They switched from the train to a horse cart, and then a town, called Dalhousie, rounded the bend. Rabi burst out laughing. It was a cluster of gingerbread houses that comically duplicated a quaint English village.

“Homesickness,” his father whispered.

The hill stations were built for British families as a summer retreat, an escape from the terrible fevers that killed many women and children if they risked staying in Delhi or Calcutta. But after his initial surprise, Rabi was blind to

everything but the natural wonder of the place. Being shut up in a mansion all his life, he had fantasized about the world he couldn't enter. Now it exploded in every direction, and the vastness made him dizzy. He had the strange sensation of being the center of everything he saw, an invisible point of awe.

There was something else too. He had been given the sacred thread, which was a major step to manhood for all Indians. The ceremony, called *upanayana*, was ancient and solemn, a rite of passage that Lord Rama would have knelt down to receive. Priests chanted mantras in an atmosphere of incense, fruits, and flowers; there was a sacred fire into which offerings were made. Rabi felt as if the fragrant fumes were lifting him up. When the three-stranded cotton cord was laid across his shoulders, he trembled. A faint shock went through his body, and with wide eyes he gazed at his father, who understood.

"It's real. Invisible things can be real," his father murmured.

Rabi believed him. It was like the cold dusting of snow on his shoulders. He felt it when he read about the mountains; images formed in his mind, mysterious and vivid, even before he set eyes on the real snowcapped peaks. But he wondered why the sacred thread always seemed to rest on him now.

They stayed in the hill station for three months, in a rented bungalow with mountain grandeur outside the window and a frigid stream close by where father and son bathed every morning. He was given biographies to read and history books, astronomy lessons (which Rabi loved, since he could take the star maps out at night while gazing at the wondrously clear sky, like black crystal), and tables of Sanskrit verbs. Rabi knew no other life, so none of this seemed unusual, not even the meager food and long hours of meditation that his father imposed. The shared routine was their bond.

One day they were out for a walk when his father recalled something.

“You asked me if our people thought I was a god?” His father always said “our people,” because he disliked words like “peasant” and “servant.”

He pointed to a ragged boy squatting by the side of the road. He was a Dalit, considered untouchable by tradition and long prejudice. The boy stared at the ground, making himself invisible until they passed. When Debendranath gestured to him, the Dalit hesitated. On the rare occasion when an upper-caste stranger gave him a small coin, it was always thrown at him so that no contact would be made. Some Brahmins went home and bathed if the shadow of a Dalit fell across them.

When the boy got close enough, Debendranath said, “Sit with us. I want to tell my son why you are a god.”

Startled, the Dalit stammered, “But I need a bath.”

He blushed for uttering something stupid. He wasn't happy in the first place to be in the presence of rich strangers.

Rabi's father held out a water bag. “Drink and rest in the shade. My boy is interested in gods, and we can't disappoint him.”

The Dalit did as he was told.

Debendranath turned to Rabi. “Why is this boy a god? If you were his mother, she would say that he is exceptionally beautiful, like a temple statue. Our eyes wander to beauty naturally, without being told to. Beauty has a power of its own, whether in a lovely young girl or the tree we are sitting beneath.”

The Dalit gaped, but Rabi was used to his father's way of talking. The only thing that made him squirm was the reference to pretty girls.

“Nature is rich in beauty,” his father went on. “We don't ask why. We simply accept it. But what happens when the beautiful girl departs and is out of sight? What happens when we leave the temple and its statues? Beauty still lingers. Our eyes have nothing to see, yet something lingers in the heart.

We feel touched, and if something is beautiful enough, we feel inspired.”

Rabi couldn't grasp every word, but he knew what his father meant. When he went to sleep at night in their bungalow, the darkness was filled with a presence like perfume. He had even told his father about it.

“I call this the scent of beauty,” his father said. “If you follow perfume wafting down a dark alley at night, it can lead anywhere. It could even lead to danger, but we follow anyway. Similarly, we trail after beauty, hungering to find its source. For surely to be in your mother's arms is better than simply remembering her scent.”

Rabi's mother had stayed at home, but he had no trouble remembering the patchouli she wore. If he shut his eyes, the scent came back by itself, like a voice from a faraway land.

Debendranath looked over at the Dalit, who was holding the water bag halfway to his mouth.

“You can drink from it,” Rabi's father said, nodding. The boy hesitated. It didn't seem possible that he wouldn't contaminate the water. But the day had grown fiercely hot, even near the mountains, and he gulped down a few big swigs. Rabi was silent, sunk in thought.

His father said, “Heed what I'm saying. Beauty makes us follow it. Everyone knows this, but most cannot see the mystery. They think that the way to pursue beauty is to run after the next girl who intoxicates them. Or perhaps money intoxicates them instead, or power. But beauty is a mystery because it comes from God. I brought you to the hill station so that you can see God everywhere. But really all you see is the scent he leaves behind. Or call it his secret messages.”

“What do the messages say?” asked Rabi, who liked puzzles.

“They say, ‘Follow me’,” his father replied.

“Where?”

Without answering, his father lightly tapped Rabi in the middle of his chest. “You cannot possess God. The mystery remains endless, all the days of our life. But you can feel it inside and cherish that feeling, like a precious pearl.”

The Dalit was bored, having never heard such talk. He wasn't interested in Rabi, although the two boys were about the same age. Without a doubt the stranger's son would pelt him with rocks the moment his father's back was turned. The two strangers grew quiet, a good time for the Dalit to escape. He put down the water bag skin and crept away.

“He's afraid of us,” Rabi said when he noticed what had happened. The Dalit was still in sight, but a good fifty yards down the road already.

“He'd be much more afraid if you told him who he really is. People crave to hear that they are part of God, but when they hear it, they feel ashamed. A pity.”

His father had retreated into a kind of bemused detachment. Rabi knew this mood very well. It was predictable, in fact. Every time his father waxed passionate about a subject, immediately he seemed to be sucked into himself. The retreat didn't make him sad, but he would be unreachable for moments or hours. Rabi understood, since he was much the same way. So they let the Dalit escape without handing him a rupee. Father and son gazed at the clouds gathering like misty fleece over the far peaks. Since the mystery is different for everyone, nobody can tell if they were thinking the same thoughts. At least they shared the same sky, which was enough.

God, Rabi found, was like chasing a train. On the way to the station your carriage is blocked by a cowherd. By the time you make it to the platform, red-faced and breathless, the train is gone, leaving only wisps of smoke and the acrid smell of cinders. But you must get to Delhi, so you push on to the next station, and there too the train has just left. The same thing happens town after town, until you only meet up with the train

when you have traveled all the way to Delhi and find it sitting in the yard, grinning at you. The difference with God is that most people reach death before they reach Delhi.

Death in the family had been the problem all along. After the old servant Kailash, it was Rabi's mother, who was taken when he was thirteen. Then it was his father, but Rabi was over forty by then, so the world considered it natural. Another old man, this one rich and famous, received an obsequious obituary. The world had no idea. Rabi had not just grown up under his parents' noses. He had seen life and love through his mother, as he saw mind and service through his father.

Where did these gifts come from? Where did they go?

He sat on the porch overlooking the grounds of his estate. No one called him Rabi anymore, only Rabindranath. People murmured the name as they bent to touch his feet. Everything revolved around him—a family, a school, the local farmers, the struggle for Indian independence. In all this busy round, Rabindranath knew only one thing: he was chasing the train to Delhi.

When the becalmed air of noon settled over the activity on the estate, he liked to dictate. He was doing it that day.

“I slept and dreamed that life was joy. I awoke and saw that life was service. I acted and behold, service was joy.”

Tagore paused, glancing over at the young male secretary squatting on the porch. “Did you get that?”

The secretary nodded and smiled. The heat wasn't too suffocating near the cool manor house, and he was privileged to serve Bengal's greatest writer. Rabi had grown into that. The secretary modestly bent over his notepad, ready for the next line. What was he really thinking? Maybe nothing. Maybe he sat at Rabi's feet in silent awe. It would do no good to ask him. We are all mysteries to ourselves, and when we start to think, we are eavesdropping on messages sent from beyond.

That could be the next line, but it flew out of Tagore's mind before he could voice it. A pretty young woman had run up dressed in a sky-blue sari trimmed with gold thread. She was a niece, the daughter of one of his brothers, so she dared to grab him by the hand and pull him away.

"Not so fast," he protested. It was a joke, because everyone marveled that, at fifty, he had a boy's restless energy. He played at letting his niece drag him reluctantly across the lawn. The performance couldn't start without him. The dancers today were children from the local village. He worked constantly to improve their lot.

Many were Dalits, which was ironic. Tagore had written countless poems and stories about untouchables. Readers were shocked at the inner lives of these creatures and moved by their struggles. It was a new way of looking at people whose shadow used to make them cringe. The money from the stories helped pay for the school where Dalit children could be raised up. It must have been the first time in history that money came from loving untouchables instead of working them to death.

The hall was noisy when he stepped in; it instantly grew quiet. The parents who had come with their children shushed them. He mounted the stage and held a piece of paper close to his eyes. Any gathering expected some words from Rabindranath Tagore, which were received like scripture. Hadn't the king of England knighted him? But Sir Rabindranath sent back the honor as a protest against colonialism.

Now he recited slowly, knowing that for three-quarters of his audience, who couldn't read or sign their names, many words would be difficult.

When the lotus opened, I didn't notice and went away empty-handed.

Only now and again do I suddenly sit up from my dreams to smell a strange fragrance.

It comes on the south wind, a vague hint that makes me ache with longing, like the eager breath of summer wanting to be completed.

I didn't know what was so near, or that it was mine.

This perfect sweetness blossoming in the depths of my heart.

A grateful murmur went through the hall. Whatever they didn't understand, the people felt. A few started to applaud, the ones sophisticated enough to know that you can clap for poetry; it wasn't really scripture. The children rushed noisily on stage in their costumes, and the sitar and drums were already starting before Tagore took his place in the front row.

His niece looked over at him with concern. He knew that look very well. Since 1905, the year his father died, death's nose had sniffed out the others he turned to for love—his wife, then two of his children. A tragedy. Everyone said so, and they worried for him. But was any of it real? The question penetrated his grief, and when he went to sleep at night, he sometimes imagined the smell of cinders. Dangling death from his fingers, God was racing ahead.

Which was why death pervaded so many of Tagore's Dalit stories. The people he grew up with, the rich and the good, didn't know how their closest servants died, except that it must be like dumb animals, silently suffering, then whining briefly before they closed their eyes. In the Tagore family Kailash had died that way, but not another old man whom Rabi loved. He died extraordinarily.

Srikanath Babu was like a plump, round fruit on legs. He had a shining, clean-shaven face and a bald head as smooth as a mango. Kailash had wooed Rabi by building romantic tales around him, but Srikanath Babu was the boy's first critic, and the most perfect he ever had. Nothing Rabi wrote was greeted with anything less than ecstasy.

"Ah, I could sing those words going to heaven!" Srikanath Babu would exclaim.

So feverish was his enthusiasm that, before the precocious boy had finished reciting a new poem, the old man would jump up, run to Rabi's father's room, and burst in to sing the first lines. Many of these poems were *kirtans*, or devotional songs. A lover of music, Srikanath Babu was never seen without a sitar in his lap. By his side always stood a smoke-filled hubble-bubble, as the locals called a hookah.

Srikanath Babu sang peculiarly as he strummed his sitar, because he no longer had a tooth in his head. Amazingly, this too was a cause for joy.

“Why should I trouble my poor mouth with sharp fangs?” he said.

He could not tolerate to hear about suffering and death. Rabi's brothers knew how to torment Srikanath Babu to the point of tears. They had only to read him legends of Prince Rama or the warrior Arjuna in which a character was pierced by arrows or hacked with a sword. Srikanath Babu would thrust his arms out, as if pushing away a snake, and beg them to stop.

The day came when Rabi's father was a bedridden invalid enduring his final illness. He was resting at his leafy river estate near the town of Chinsura. Srikanath Babu was desperate to see him one last time. He himself was very ill and could only walk with the aid of his grown daughter. The two of them took a train to Chinsura. There was great anxiety about undertaking such a journey. Srikanath Babu was able to see only if he took his fingers and held his eyelids open for a moment.

He survived the trip, though, and was taken immediately into Debendranath's sickroom. Srikanath Babu lifted his eyelids and wept at the sight. He could hardly speak, and in fact left without saying a word as the patient slept.

“Didn't you want to greet him?” his daughter asked.

Srikanath Babu, who was humming softly to himself, shook his head. “I touched the dust of his feet. That was why I

came.” Two days later he died in the little cottage by the river that they had provided him.

Death had undone everyone in Rabi’s life in a different way. Most were at peace, but one, the wife of his brother Jyotir, smiled one day, gently pointed out weak spots in a new poem of his, and then took her own life in the night. Each time he was unable to escape a spell of dark depression. At the same time, he wondered more and more what it meant to die. There were things you had to know if you wanted to unravel life’s secrets—love, truth, beauty, but also death. He jotted down any thoughts that might bring him an answer, and the astonishing part was that when he felt close to the mystery, so did his readers.

Sometimes he touched on the tenderness wrapped up in sorrow:

My heart beats in waves
on the shore of the world
And writes its name in tears
with these words:

“I love you.”

But more often he wondered at things no words could express:

What do I long for?
Something that is felt in the night
But not seen in the day.

He must have been sunk in such thoughts, because the next thing Tagore knew, the hall was filled with the sound of clapping. The performance was over. Proud parents were smiling. The children onstage were bowing; the musicians staring around, impatient to get to tiffin, their afternoon meal.

No one could rise before the master did, so Tagore smiled at the children and said, “Go, go!” Under a tent beside the hall treats were laid out on tables.

His niece waited at the door, renewing her concerned look. It would have helped more if she wore Srikanath's unquenchable smile. His jollity would have been foolish in another person, even idiotic. But people never mocked him behind his back.

"Do you ever think about God?" Rabi had asked as a boy.

"Always. What else is there to think about? The world takes care of itself, no matter how hard people try to run it."

"And what do you know about God?" Rabi asked.

"Only one thing," replied Srikanath Babu, puffing on his hubble-bubble. "God is an endless mystery."

Tagore patted his niece's hand when she tucked it into his arm. They started to cross the lawn to the refreshment tent. "Do you recall old Srikanath Babu?" he asked. "I seem to hear his voice today."

"How could I? I wasn't born yet," his niece said. She kept her eyes peeled for anything on the ground that might trip her aging uncle, as if she were escorting a Dresden doll to a tea party.

"He was very fond of me," mused Tagore. "And he came to a good end. But that's not what was on my mind. He taught me the only important thing I ever heard about God."

Tagore repeated to his niece the comment about God being an endless mystery. "It's funny that such a simple remark should stick with me, but it did, for years. And then I saw what Srikanath Babu really meant."

They had arrived safely at the tent, and his niece looked around for a chair where the Dresden doll wouldn't be disturbed. "What did he mean?" she asked absentmindedly.

"God has to be a mystery," Tagore replied. "Because the only one who could explain him is himself, and no one bothers to ask him anymore."

What was driving him? Restlessness. It had become an irresistible force. When Tagore arrived at a new place, which could be Buenos Aires or Shanghai, reporters milled around, craning their necks to get a better look. Here was something you don't see every day, a tall old man in flowing silk robes. He wore a long white beard, like an eternal grandfather or Merlin the magician. When he leaned into the microphones, blinking at the popping flashbulbs, he said uplifting things, which everyone wanted to believe.

“Love is not a mere impulse. It must contain truth, which is law.”

That was his stock in trade, uplift. No one snickered, although some mentally rolled their eyes.

“Every child comes with the message that God is not yet discouraged about mankind. “

The voice was sonorous, the eyes remarkable, wide and liquid. But what world was Tagore living in?

Hitler was on the rise; the markets had crashed in 1929. What did the Indian sage have to say about things that matter in the real world?

“We live in the world when we love it.”

Hopeless. At least Gandhi had a cause worth space on the front page. Tagore was on record as disliking mass protests, even for Indian independence. The reporters bent over their notepads, but everyone in the room knew that this would be a story filed under “local color.”

Yet he never stopped his journey, lasting for decades now, to far corners of the world. Every poet is restless. The muse is a demanding mistress. But he had the mystery before him, always to follow, never to capture. Tagore wasn't blind. He saw the skepticism in reporters' eyes. He could envision them loosening their neckties after he left the room, glad that the sermon was over and they could escape to the closest bar for a drink.

Where had his restlessness carried him now? Somewhere near Potsdam, the map said.

“A pleasant place, serene,” he murmured gazing out the car window. “Can I walk the rest of the way? The trees are reaching out.”

The driver, who was a round-faced German, didn’t want to say no, but he didn’t want to deviate from his assigned duty either. The professor was sitting patiently in his small brown house with the red tile roof. A new batch of reporters was milling around, not just Germans but French, Poles, even some Americans, who had the best cigarettes. Trees could wait. But the driver let the old man out a little short of the path to the front door, so he could have his serenity.

Tagore took his time among the slender trees that seemed like maidens with their delicate leaves swaying in the breeze. He was seventy, and the forest meant more to him than did Hitler. The reporters would seize on things he said against Gandhi’s total pacifism. “Did Gandhi want to invite Herr Hitler and Signor Mussolini to take whatever they wanted?”

The real world. It kept racing on its frantic pace, fueled by the next crisis. In such a world, what fuels peace?

He forced himself to abandon the forest and walked up the path to the house. Seeing him out the window, the professor adjusted his formal coat and stepped out on the porch. This was the moment. Cameras were raised. The great Tagore was shaking hands with the great Einstein. It was like a collision of planets.

In the hubbub Einstein leaned over and whispered. “I memorized a line of yours. ‘We come nearest to greatness when we are great in humility.’ I believe it.”

Tagore smiled. Not because of a flattering quote. He sensed something. When you got close, the famous face of Einstein—the whirligig white hair, caterpillar eyebrows, and sagging eyelids—didn’t prepare you for the secret he carried inside.

Tagore leaned over and whispered back. "I would memorize your words, but unfortunately they are all numbers."

They retreated inside, where there were tea and comfortable chairs. After a moment, a rare thing happened: two great men became genuinely interested in each other. Einstein didn't want to talk about world peace or the Nazis and the danger that would drive him out of Germany if it grew worse against the Jews. He had God on his mind.

"Do you think God is separate from us?"

"No. Human nature is infinite. It can reach the divine."

"How?"

"By merging with ultimate reality. We live in a human universe. Eternity reflects the eternal human. You have been busy hunting down time and space. I talk about the eternal human because without us, there is no time and space."

Einstein sat back. They regarded each other, and he saw immediately that something huge was at stake.

Forming his words carefully, Einstein said, "There have always been two views of the universe. One says that the world exists even if human beings were wiped off the face of the earth. The other says that there could be no universe without human beings."

Tagore nodded. "Quite right."

"But if no one was inside this house, that table would still exist."

"Why does the table exist?" Tagore asked. "Because someone perceives it. As an individual, you feel separate from the table, so it appears to be independent of you. But the cosmic mind contains everything. Nothing can exist unless it is perceived, and Brahman sees everything."

"In science we collect facts, and that leads to truth," Einstein countered. "Gravity existed long before human beings arrived, don't you agree?" Einstein's tone was certain. He was

famous for once saying that he hoped the moon still existed even if he stopped looking at it.

Tagore shrugged. “If there is absolute truth outside what human beings can understand, it is unreachable by your facts. The universe exists as it relates to humans.”

Einstein allowed himself a wicked laugh. “Then I am more religious than you are!”

Their words were taken down by a reporter and sent around the world. The conversation lasted three days. People were divided. It seemed amazing that Einstein, who had baffled the greatest minds with relativity, making time stretch like a rubber band, would ask a poet’s opinion about the universe. Tagore’s answers, it was agreed, were high-minded, but no match for science. The eternal human? The cosmic mind? A famous English philosopher wrote to a friend saying that he would have to avoid Tagore the next time he came to London. His ideas were too embarrassing, a rubbishy jumble.

But in the small house, with just the two of them, Einstein grew pensive. There was a famous Greek statue of Apollo that he had gazed at in the Vatican.

“If there were no human beings anymore,” he said, “then the Apollo Belvedere would no longer be beautiful?”

“No.”

“I agree with regard to beauty, but not to truth.”

“Why not?” Tagore shot back. “Truth is realized through humans too.”

Einstein kept talking because he wasn’t embarrassed by Tagore. “The mind of God” was a phrase he had used himself. Religious people who worried about science as an enemy sighed with relief when he said that he wanted to know the mind of God. He didn’t practice any religion, and he disbelieved in God the Father, the God of Jewish tradition. Yet *something* at the far horizon of the universe filled him with awe and wonder. It wasn’t his brain that had unfolded relativity; it was wonder.

“Whatever God may be,” Einstein said, “perhaps it is best that he stays out of reach. The unknown drives me on, and I solve the unknown through science.”

“But even science is an activity of scientific humans,” Tagore replied. “Your facts don’t exist outside the man who sees and measures.”

Einstein shook his head. “I cannot prove that my conception is right, but it is my religion.”

In the end, two planets didn’t collide. They slid past each other. In passing, they exchanged glances. If you looked, the air was breathable on both planets; the landscape wasn’t alien.

Other news swept their meeting off the front pages. Worse was coming to worst everywhere. People started saying that this depression was the Great Depression. Hitler grew more frightening by the day. The train was leaving the station full of the disillusioned. Tagore could wave at them from the platform if he wanted to. He was already being forgotten anyway.

But this wasn’t his experience, which remained luminous. God remained elusive, but a radiance presented itself every day. Inside the radiance a voice whispered, “I am here.” Tagore obeyed his restlessness until he couldn’t. His body surrendered to illness; the days became a trial of pain. He was glad to be alone with the radiance, which didn’t fade despite his physical agonies. Another world war came and spread untold catastrophe. He was nearly eighty. Death stood at the door, but didn’t enter his room for two more years.

Tagore could meet death’s eye, and therefore it had no power to do anything but wait. Words had to release the poet before life would. Tagore asked for someone to take down a poem one day, even though he hardly had enough energy to wet his lips from the water glass by his bedside. In a thready voice he began,

I have given completely
whatever I had to give.

He stopped, gasping for air. There was no letting go yet.

In return, if I receive anything—
some love, some forgiveness—
then I will take it with me
when I step on the boat . . .

Nothing more came. The bedroom was silent and still. The old friend who was taking dictation thought he heard a rattle in the dying poet's throat. It would be a shame if his final verse was cut short.

The old friend softly got up to fetch the nurse, only to be stopped by a movement he caught out of the corner of his eye. Tagore had made a weak wave of the hand. The thready voice returned, and the old friend leaned close to catch Tagore's faint mumble.

When I set foot on the boat
that takes me across
to the festival of an end without words.

Then nothing more. Death no longer waited courteously at the door. Outside, the breeze was reduced to a faint stirring. Barely enough to make the leaves tremble on the crest of the trees, barely enough to stir the hair of maidens.

Revealing the Vision

“Today the light of mysticism went out.” The obituary for Rabindranath Tagore could have included that sentence when he passed away in August 1941. He was the last great mystical poet to achieve world fame, and almost the last mystic in the public eye. A momentous change had occurred as science replaced religion in modern life. Tagore bridged both worlds, thanks to his highly Westernized education at his father's knee. He would become a mystic in the line of Giordano Bruno, who made no distinction between scientific wonder and spiritual awe.

For Christians of the high Victorian era that Tagore was born in, the age of faith, already waning by the time of Shakespeare, still drew breath. As long as God couldn't be understood, he held power. Saints were like scientists who journeyed into the unknown and came back to report, through their mystical experiences, that God was real.

We take it for granted that faith is inferior to facts when it comes to deciding what is real and what is illusion. Tagore didn't accept this truism. He insisted that God's reality was not threatened by uncovering scientific facts. He wasn't stumping for faith, however. Referring to a mystical inner journey, he said, "You can't cross the sea merely by standing and staring at the water." Or by measuring the ocean waves with a scientific instrument, he might have added.

His mysticism wasn't dismissed for being out of touch, which is surprising. Tagore was writing to a worried world, and when people read *Gitanjali*, his book of rapturous songs to God, it was thrilling to find someone who was immersed in love for the divine, a love so all-consuming that it was like drowning.

Thou hast made me endless, such is thy pleasure.

This frail vessel thou emptiest again and again,
and fillest it ever with fresh life.

Readers were entranced. The intoxication of Rumi had returned, seven centuries later.

This little flute of a reed thou hast carried over hills and
dales,

and hast breathed through it melodies eternally new.

For a time Tagore was a sensation. He was the first non-European to receive the Nobel Prize for literature, which came in 1913, only three years after *Gitanjali* was written and, even more astonishingly, only a year after it appeared in English. That same year he toured the United States and Great Britain, displaying the restlessness that carried him to every corner of the globe for the next twenty years.

The West's enthusiasm for Tagore was feverish, but it wasn't destined to last. His message of love as an eternal mystery didn't jibe with the unspeakable horrors of World War I. What was rapture compared with machine guns and armored tanks? In the face of criticism, Tagore's certainty was powerful. He stood in a spiritual tradition that went back five thousand years to roots in ancient India. He had inherited a profound view of life that had survived many catastrophes. Labeling this tradition with a single word—*mystical*—gives it short shrift. Everything about human existence, including love, death, truth, and beauty, needed the foundation provided by God. God justified the mystery of life. He gave human beings a soul and a lord to surrender to. The violence and conflict inherent in human nature found an escape in the belief that beyond war, crime, power struggles, greed, and evil deeds, we are essentially divine.

If Tagore's had been an isolated voice, I doubt that Einstein would have taken him seriously or even agreed to meet him. Their conversations, which took place over three days in 1930 inside Einstein's small house outside Potsdam, made the world listen. Lengthy verbatim accounts were printed in major newspapers. But this wasn't entirely the clash of religion and science. Einstein was constantly consulted for his opinions about God. He was both brilliant and benign. Unlike Darwin, who was bitterly opposed to the conventional religious piety of the Victorian era, Einstein wanted God to exist in some form. He famously said, "Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind."

In other words, Einstein held out hope for cooperation, not just compromise. People could see the horror of a godless world, and yet God needed to be compatible with modern life. When Tagore met Einstein, he was almost seventy and Einstein just past fifty. They recognized in each other two men who had thought deeply about the nature of reality. This is why, I think, they spoke as equals, even though Einstein would never become a religionist. Tagore had made a statement about love that turned into a major quotation: "Love is not a mere

impulse. It must contain truth, which is law.” Einstein was too much the physicist to allow “truth” and “law” to be used so loosely. Yet he went down Tagore’s path farther than one would have expected.

Their points of agreement are striking. Both held that God was a mystery beyond complete understanding. To Tagore, this mystery was internal, wrapped up in the mystery of the human heart. To Einstein, it was external, poised at the edge of the knowable universe. Yet he agreed, surprisingly, that the material world couldn’t be proven to exist. In fact, this point had been troubling modern physics, well outside the walls of the church.

Quantum physics didn’t set out at the turn of the century to destroy the picture of the physical world that we receive through the five senses. There was no agenda to turn atoms into clouds of energy, to make time expand and contract, or to declare that the subatomic world was entirely ruled by uncertainty. However, by 1930 all of these things turned out to be true. Physics shocked itself, and Einstein wasn’t the only quantum pioneer who looked with doubt and no small degree of dread at what he had uncovered.

He found himself forced to make a choice between two views of reality. One camp of physicists surrendered to the fact of radical uncertainty. Nothing was truly solid or even physical; electrons behaved like waves in one mode and particles in another. If the building blocks of the universe no longer had any fixed physical properties, turning into ghosts, then why believe that the universe itself was any different? Einstein, who freely said that he wanted to know the mind of God, could not accept a random universe where every event was a matter of chance. He believed that nature existed in an orderly, stable way, even though he couldn’t prove it. His camp was much smaller than the camp that wanted to topple all absolutes, and by 1930 he was isolated, quickly turning into a semitragic figure. His great discoveries were already behind him. He was clinging to ideas that other great physicists, such

as Niels Bohr, Erwin Schrödinger, and Werner Heisenberg, had shaken off ten years before.

The public, with its simplistic image of Einstein as the greatest mind in the world—if not of all time—didn't realize his actual position. But he laid it out for Tagore, and the irony is that the Indian mystical poet held a view that was much closer to quantum physics, as it eventually matured, than Einstein did. Tagore declared that the observer creates perceived reality, that absolute truth was unattainable through objective facts. His was a ghostly world too, just like the realm of subatomic particles. Ideas so radical that Einstein couldn't bring himself to believe in them turned out to feel quite natural to Tagore.

We should remember that Tagore was always more than a poet; in today's terms he was a polymath, and he had been brought up in a privileged household where the children were taught mathematics and the natural sciences. Such a background allowed him to make sharp replies to Einstein. The sharpest came when Einstein made the point that was the bedrock of his beliefs. A beautiful sculpture like the Apollo Belvedere, he said, would no longer be beautiful if there were no human beings to gaze upon it. But it didn't take an observer to create truth, meaning the truth about what is real and what isn't. If every human being disappeared, the table that sat in the room would still exist.

Tagore came back with a quick denial. If beauty depends upon human beings, so does reality itself. The table didn't take its existence from any single individual. Obviously there was still a table in the room if the room was empty of people. But the table needed something outside materialism—the cosmic mind—in order to exist. The chain of logic was very clear: we only know what is real through our consciousness. If anything is real outside our awareness, it will remain unknown. Because consciousness is so central—letting us see, hear, touch, taste, and smell the world—we must find out where it came from. Otherwise, we are like dreamers wandering in a world they

take to be real, because no one has told them that they are asleep.

So where did consciousness come from? The only viable answer was that it came from itself. This is the mystical position, and few have voiced it as beautifully in modern times as Tagore when he portrays himself as a tiny speck in the infinity of God's creation.

At the immortal touch of thy hands
my little heart loses its limits in joy
and gives birth to utterance ineffable.

Thy infinite gifts come to me only
on these very small hands of mine.
Ages pass, and still thou pourest,
and still there is room to fill.

We are not alone, then, as conscious beings. God or Brahman or the universal mind—pick your own terminology—surrounds us. It is our source and origin. The only reason that we can begin to understand the universe is that its laws and orderliness aren't random. Every atom fits into a scheme that is innately orderly, not to mention beautiful, intelligent, loving, and all-knowing.

Because he worried about these things too, Einstein understood the logic of Tagore's worldview. Modern physics had already dismantled the physical world far enough that reality was looking more and more like a dream. Still, Einstein clung to what he called his religion: a belief that the universe was real as it appeared, not needing human beings to give it shape, form, color, sounds, and all the rest. It is quite moving to view Einstein in the midst of such confusing emotions. His doubts had placed him outside Judaism and quantum physics at the same time, standing on crumbling ground.

Tagore, on the other hand, never wavered. When he spoke of the “eternal human” and a “human universe,” he was using deceptively simple words for complex ancient ideas. This was the inner journey of Buddha, Jesus, Lao-tzu, Zoroaster, Plato, Rumi, and every other spiritual seeker. For them all, the human mind reflects the divine mind. Thousands of years before Tagore, the Vedic sages had declared, “The world is as you are.” There is no separation between what happens “in here” and “out there.” Behind the shifting appearance of the Many—the wildly diverse activity in nature—stands the One. The One is higher reality. We see, because It sees. We are moved by beauty, because It contains infinite beauty. When we feel that we know something to be true, our minds have touched, just barely and for an instant, the endless scope of absolute Truth.

Tagore’s story ends in a protracted, painful illness before he died in Calcutta, at rest from his world travels. Looking around, it’s hard to find a conversation today that discusses reality and God with the same delicacy and respect that Einstein showed Tagore. The argument for his kind of idealism, where to live in the world is to love it, was defeated by a second world war and the looming atomic age. The victory of science is rampant; gurus stand in line behind techies. But the doubts expressed by Einstein haven’t been resolved. The present point in God’s evolution is ambiguous. Every negative trend from the past—a suspicious clergy, rigid dogma, the fight against tolerance—survives alongside positive trends that are just as ancient—a loving Creator, humans made in the image of the divine, direct contact with God’s presence.

The horror of a godless world haunts millions of people. Technology races ahead, threatening to overwhelm us. Beyond the personal computer lies the promise of a quantum computer. Information doubles every two years. Smart phones rule. But God isn’t susceptible to obsolescence. The divine speaks silently amid the din of shouting voices, and the miracle is that someone, somewhere, is still willing to listen.

Epilogue

“Are You There?”

Reading the stories of saints, sages, and visionaries creates a strange sensation, a mixture of inspiration and doubt. We are like a culture that once had telephones until they stopped working. We try to talk to God, only to hear dead silence on the line. “Are you there? Hello, hello. Is anyone there?” is the only thing left to say. With the connection gone, it’s impossible to know if God is listening. Perhaps he or she is also asking, “Are you there?” from the other end of the line.

Before a connection to God can be restored, a vital question needs to be asked. Did people ever talk to God in the first place? The answer, if we are being logical, must be either yes or no. “Maybe” is a copout. No one would keep a telephone around that didn’t work, not for the many centuries that human beings felt that God or the gods were listening. Someone felt a divine presence and heard it deliver messages from a higher reality. I’ve offered ten such people, and they are connected by a thread that runs through the history of spirituality. It’s not faith that joins them, but consciousness.

Now that the age of faith is well and truly over, modern people make a reasonable demand. If God exists, we should be able to verify him. Holy words don’t suffice. The authority of saints guarantees nothing in a fact-based world. To give the divine a free pass by claiming that God is above petty doubts doesn’t reassure anyone who harbors those doubts.

God is reached through an inner journey, and the whole problem of proof could be settled if this journey could be verified. God once walked in the Garden of Eden in the cool of the evening, but no more. Ever since, the deity has left invisible footprints—until now, perhaps. Brain research has gotten sophisticated enough to peer into the working of minute areas of the brain, and neuroscience makes maps of regions that used to be terra incognita. Such maps can tell you which

areas of the cortex light up when a person feels compassion, possesses strong faith, has a holy vision, hears voices, or prays.

“You are the light of the world,” which Jesus said to his disciples, suddenly has a literal meaning. In fact, the areas of the frontal lobes associated with higher functions like compassion grow larger and stronger among Tibetan Buddhist monks who meditate on compassion. Certain brain frequencies in the delta band increase at the same time beyond anything seen before. God’s footprints were not invisible after all; they were just hidden beneath the cranial bones in the soft gray tissue of our brains.

Making Our Own Connection

Where does this leave you and me as hopeful seekers? By showing that spiritual practice changes the brain, reality expands. The only reality anyone can know must register in the brain. Now atheists and other skeptics cannot reasonably claim that nothing is happening during spiritual experiences. The door is open for anyone who is eager for God. Or to be precise, four doors have opened. Looking back at the visionaries in this book, they followed four paths to reach higher reality.

The path of devotion has always been open to those who love God. As their love intensifies, they feel God’s presence drawing near. That was easier in the age of faith. Daily life involved much prayer, and the local church was at the center of birth, death, marriage, feast days, Communion, and many holy days on the Christian calendar. As an inner journey, the devotional path is harder to take today. It involves an immersion in wonder before God and all divine works. Nature is regarded as a canvas that conceals the hand of God. The great advantage of the devotional path is its joy. The seeker worships in order to contact bliss. But as Rumi, the perfect devotee, shows, this love affair with the divine is as tumultuous as any human love affair, and just as prone to

heartache. It is up to you to know at the level of feeling if God has touched your heart.

The path of understanding is the way open to the mind. It involves reflection on the great questions of life: Who am I? Why was I created? What does my existence mean? If only abstract answers come back, there is only dry mental investigation. But the mind can become passionate about God, and then it cannot rest without seeing through every illusion that blocks the way. All four paths are lifetime journeys, but the way of understanding may be the narrowest. You must have a strong intellect and unflagging curiosity. Thinking brings its own joys, but no one would say that this way is blissful. Taking Socrates as a model, one sees that society doesn't approve of gadflies and questioners of received wisdom. Yet there are people who cannot stop thinking about God, and knowing the truth about higher reality satisfies them more than devotional bliss can.

The path of service is the way of action, finding ways to do good in the name of God. Charity is one way to serve. Giving your time selflessly is another. But more than good works are called for. The deeper question is finding out which actions will draw you closer to God. Religions often fall back on the notion that God wants us to do certain things, such as obey his laws, to earn us approval from on high. I think that's mostly church politics, a way to keep worshippers in line. Being infinite, God wants nothing; therefore, he wants nothing from us either. Our limited self-love is nothing compared with infinite love. The secret on the path of service is to lose the ego, which serves only "I, me, and mine." To reach God, your service must be to life itself, which means serving all beings. Taking the Baal Shem Tov as our model, we see a humble existence that needs no reward, but derives inspiration from giving.

The path of meditation is the way of consciousness. Devotion begins with a feeling of joy. Understanding begins with a flash of insight. Service begins with an act of humility. But when you begin on the path of meditation, there is only

being. In order to be, we need only one thing: consciousness. You are aware that you exist. Such a path would seem to be meager, if not threadbare. Being doesn't bring images of fun to mind. It brings nothing to mind so much as a blank. Which turns out to be the secret, because in that seeming blankness lies the beginning of everything. Consciousness is the womb of creation. Everything you will ever think, say, or do begins here. On the path of meditation, you open your mind to higher consciousness as your very essence. Taking Julian of Norwich as our model, we realize that this path is solitary, because meditation needs silence and self-communion. Its great advantage is that isolation doesn't have to be physical. You can meditate in the midst of an everyday life. Time is no obstacle when your goal is the timeless.

These four paths were set down in ancient India thousands of years ago. They have served—and been validated—for countless generations. I would also claim that they are universal ways to reach higher reality, not just Eastern ways. With the collapse of faith as a common inheritance, each of us must undertake the inner journey of our own choosing, but that was always true. Saints and sages once had more prestige than they do today. The voices they heard were not suspiciously labeled schizophrenic hallucinations, grand-mal seizures, or symptoms of a brain tumor. Those explanations arose in modern times in the wake of two world wars and the advent of the atomic bomb, which effectively corroded faith for millions—the medical rationale arrived as an afterthought, to justify well-entrenched doubts about a merciful, all-loving God. Yet the medical “evidence” rings hollow, because when we read the book of Job, Plato, St. Paul, or Rumi, their words mean something. They stir us deeply enough that we feel reconnected, however briefly and vaguely.

Living Proof

To satisfy science, what we need already exists: the feedback loop. Your body operates through countless chemical messages sent to trillions of cells; these messages create a

response that the cells send back to the brain, and depending on what the response is, the next round of messages will change. The brain listens to feedback, and its connection to the rest of the body forms a loop. Now substitute God for the brain and human beings for the body's cells. The feedback loop remains the same: message and response. If you feel any impulse of joy, hope, beauty, or faith, its source cannot be outside your own awareness.

Divine messages occur within the field of consciousness. If God were outside human awareness, he wouldn't exist, not for us anyway. The scope of reality is infinite and eternal; this has always been part of God's mystery as well. But the infinite and eternal became enclosed in time and space with the big bang, and the same happened to the mind. If the mind of God became limited enough to enter the minds of ordinary people—which is what Job, Plato, St. Paul, and Rumi are all about—that isn't a miracle. Nothing in the infinite fields of matter, energy, and information that create the visible universe can be known until they are reduced to the human scale.

Einstein respected the cosmic mystery enough to say that what astonished him most wasn't the universe, but the fact that we can know it at all. With the same attitude, some farsighted scientists today have begun to recognize that consciousness is a proper field of study and research (largely thanks to breakthroughs in brain scans like the functional MRI). Some even go so far as seeing spirituality as inherently human—our brains, our genes, and therefore our thoughts are set up to seek God. This is a startling claim against the background of science as the great opponent of religion. We don't have to look upon it as a claim at all, just a hypothesis.

Let's call it the "soul hypothesis" for short. It can be stated without using any reference to God, as follows. We are conscious beings who want to know where our awareness came from. Only consciousness can understand consciousness; hence the long tradition of the inner journey. The saints and sages of the past were Einsteins of consciousness, explorers into the nature of reality. They were testing the soul

hypothesis, and if these explorers came back with the same findings, century after century, culture after culture, why not give their findings credence?

Their findings are startlingly similar, in fact. The mind, they said, is like a river. On the surface there is constant motion and turbulence; reality can be described as constant change as the river flows through time and space. Just below the surface, however, the river grows slower and calmer. There are no waves, and as you dive deeper, the turbulence on the surface ceases to register. Stillness prevails, and at the very bottom of the river, if it is deep enough, the water doesn't move at all, or just imperceptibly.

Our connection to God, then, is like that between a wave and the still depths. A river is all one thing, flowing water, yet reality on the surface appears very different from reality down below. The great discovery of our Einsteins of consciousness was the revelation that all consciousness is the same. There can be no separation from God if this is so. God cannot die or abandon or stand aloof like a watchmaker unconcerned after he set the cosmic mechanism in motion. We are essentially divine, because God is just another name for the origin and source of consciousness.

We are back to the feedback loop now. If God's mind is an infinite version of our mind, all our thoughts are movements within the divine mind. Whether you call yourself a believer or an atheist is irrelevant. Consciousness never stops sending messages to itself, waiting for a response, and then adjusting the next round of messages. We possess a soul insofar as we realize that we are part of the feedback loop. The only difference is where you put your attention. Some people are content to remain on the turbulent surface of the river. They are fascinated by the constant activity, the ups and downs; life is a river-rafting trip. But nothing prevents a few people from focusing their attention on another level of consciousness, where calm, peace, wisdom, silence, and the vastness of the cosmic mystery reside.

My mind returns these days to Rabindranath Tagore. I chose him as a modern explorer in consciousness, and there is poignancy in his restless wandering. He was born four years before Lincoln was assassinated and died four years before the first atomic weapon was exploded at the Trinity Site. As much as anyone in history, Tagore felt the desperate need for humanity to hear a message of eternal love. Instead of bodhi trees and burning bushes, God's vehicle was the press conference dockside when Tagore's ship landed. Amid the barbaric terrors of the twentieth century, how strange those reporters must have felt scribbling notes about what he said.

“Let your life lightly dance on the edges of time like dew on the tip of a leaf.”

“Love does not claim possession, but gives freedom.”

“Music fills the infinite between two souls.”

What? Tell it to North Korea and Iran. Tell it to mass murderers in the Congo, or the six million who perished in the Holocaust. Fear and horror do very well if you want to break every possible connection to God. When a person gets sick, trillions of cells receive distorted, toxic messages, and if the cells perish, they might doubt that the brain exists or has their best interests in mind. The breakdown of a feedback loop leads to isolation. If you ask “Is anyone there?” and get no reply, it's only natural to feel helpless and hopeless. The answer, now and always, is to test the soul hypothesis for yourself.

There are more enticing clues than ever. Brain research has provided the traces of consciousness as heightened activity in the cortex. Quantum physics long ago dismantled the reassuring world of solid objects and neatly connected cause and effect. There are abundant reasons for believing that the inner journey isn't foolhardy or a mass delusion imposed by organized religion.

It may be necessary to look nervously over our shoulders to see if science is nodding its approval. Ultimately, however, the poets and visionaries, the outsiders and mystics who constitute the motley crew of our spiritual past knew better.

Being conscious, we are never away from the divine, even for a second, even during the darkest night of the soul. Somewhere inside, we all yearn to reconnect, and if we sit quietly, during those moments when life's richness is too overwhelmingly beautiful to ignore, we know that Tagore was profoundly right:

Love is the only reality, and it is not a mere sentiment. It is the ultimate truth that lies at the heart of creation.

Ah, we realize, someone is on the line after all.

Credits

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"A gripping tale of one man's archetypal journey through confusion, doubt, and despair to self-annihilation and the realization of his true identity as the 'light of the world.'"

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Jesus

A Story of Enlightenment

Deepak Chopra

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PART ONE

SEEKER

1

THE STRANGER IN THE SNOW

A horse!” the temple lad cried as he ran in panting for breath. “Quick, come and see.”

“Why?” I asked without looking up. I was in the middle of writing, which I did every morning. My scribbles never reached anyone outside this dim, falling-down hut, but that’s of no matter.

“Because he’s huge. Hurry, or somebody might steal him.”

“Before you do, you mean?”

The boy was so excited that he kept sloshing his bucket of hot water on the floor. He was permitted to barge into the hut to fill my bath just after dawn.

I frowned at him. “What about detachment?”

“What?” he asked.

“I thought the priest was teaching you not to get so excited.”

“That was before the horse.”

If you were born high in these mountains, a stray horse is an event. Where would this one be from? The Western empire probably, where huge black stallions are bred. The locals knew animals by the compass. Elephants come from the south, where the jungle begins, and camels from the eastern desert. In all my travels, I had seen only one of these gray monsters, who are like walking walls.

From the north, over the passes, came small, furry ponies, and these were very common—traders used ponies to reach

the villages with their goods: hemp, silk, incense, salt, dried meat, and flour. The bare necessities plus the silk to adorn a bride in joy or wrap a corpse in sorrow.

I set the ink-laden brush back on its stand and rubbed the black from my fingers. “You’d better put that bucket down before you drown us both,” I said. “Then fetch my cloak.”

Outside, a storm had swooped down off the high peaks overnight, batting at the stretched animal skins over my windows and leaving another foot of fresh snow. I emerged from the hut and looked around.

More than a horse is here, I thought.

The temple lad couldn’t stand to wait for me and rushed down the trail.

“Find the stranger,” I shouted.

The boy whirled around. I was calling with the wind, and at these altitudes my voice could be heard at a long distance.

“What stranger?” the boy called back.

“The one who fell off the horse. Search for him. Search hard, and don’t dawdle.”

The temple lad hesitated. He much preferred gawking at a fine huge horse, but finding a body in the snow had its own appeal. He nodded and turned the corner out of sight. The boulders on either side of the trail were large enough for a grown man to disappear into, much less a scrawny boy.

I proceeded slowly after him, but not because of age. I don’t know how old I am. The matter lost its interest long ago. But I can still move without creaking.

I had foreseen the mysterious stranger two days earlier, but not the overnight storm. The snow wouldn’t kill him, but the blast of frigid air that howled off the peaks most likely would. Nobody from the world below anticipates that kind of cold. I’ve helped the villagers rescue the stranded travelers who were fortunate. Only their noses and toes were blackened. They were numb at first after being dragged to shelter, but

started screaming with pain as soon as the rescuers warmed them up.

Everyone in my valley has enormous respect for the high peaks and their dangers. But they also revere the mountains, which remind them of how close Heaven is. I don't need the comfort of Heaven.

The villagers didn't call on me for rescue work anymore. It disturbed them that an old ascetic who looked like a crooked teak carving could trek in his bare feet when theirs were bound in layers of goatskin and rags. Huddling on long winter nights, they discussed this, and they decided that I had made a pact with a demon. Since there were thousands of local demons, a few could be spared to look after my feet.

I walked down the trail until I heard a faint distant sound in the wind, more like a rodent squeak than a boy's voice. But I understood its meaning. I veered left where the sound came from and hurried my steps. I had a personal interest in finding the stranger alive.

What I found when I came over the next ridge was a mound in the snow. The temple lad was staring at the mound, which didn't move.

"I waited for you before kicking it," he said. His face held that mixture of dread and relish that comes over people when they think they've discovered a corpse.

"Listen to me. Don't wish him dead. It doesn't help," I warned.

Instead of kicking at the mound, the lad knelt and began to sweep it furiously with his hands. The stranger had managed to bury himself under a foot-thick layer of snow, but that wasn't as surprising as something else. When I finally saw his outlined body, the man was crouched on his knees with clasped hands folded under his chin. The boy had never seen anyone in that posture before.

"Did he seize up like that?" he asked.

I didn't reply. As I gazed at the body, it impressed me that someone could remain praying to the point of death. The position also told me that this was a Jew, because as you travel east, holy men sit cross-legged when they pray; they don't kneel.

I told the boy to run down to the village for a sledge, and he obeyed without question. In truth the two of us could have carried the body out on our own. But I needed to be alone. As soon as the temple lad had disappeared, I brought my mouth close to the stranger's ear, which was still bright pink although covered with frost.

"Stir yourself," I whispered. "I know who you are."

For a moment nothing happened. To all appearances the stranger remained frozen, but I didn't embrace him to give him warmth from my own body. If this was the visitor I was expecting, it wasn't necessary. But I granted one small concession. I called the stranger by name.

"Jesus, awaken."

Most souls will respond when you call their name. A few will come to you even from the shadow of death. The stranger stirred, faintly at first, just enough to shake a dusting of snowflakes from his frost-matted hair. It wasn't a question of thawing out. Humans aren't like carp, which can be seen suspended in the ice all winter, only to wriggle back to life when the lakes unfreeze in spring. The stranger had willed himself into total stillness and now willed himself out again. If I had let the boy witness it, he would have been convinced that I was performing black magic.

Jesus lifted his head and stared blankly. He wasn't quite back in the world. I gradually came into focus.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"It doesn't matter," I replied.

I tried to help him to his feet. Jesus resisted. "I came only to see one man. If you're not him, leave me." He was sinewy

and strong, even after such an arduous journey, and his resistance pushed me back on my heels.

Jesus didn't ask about his horse. The tongue he spoke was coarse Greek, the kind used in the marketplace of the Western empire. He must have picked it up on his journeys. I knew some Greek, learned from traders when I was about the stranger's age, twenty-five or so.

"Don't be stubborn," I said. "I came and dug you out. Who else would bother with an ordinary mound of snow?"

Jesus remained wary. "How did you find out my name?"

"Your question answers itself," I said. "The right man would know your name without asking."

Now Jesus smiled, and together we forced his knees to unbend from the cold. He stood up shakily, then immediately fell against my shoulder.

"A moment," he said.

In that moment I took his measure. I stood half a head taller than the mountain villagers, and Jesus was that much taller than me. He wore his dark hair and beard cropped, not trimmed neatly but rough, as a traveler will do when there's no time for niceties. His brown eyes seemed darker than usual against his pale skin. Pale, one should say, compared with being sun-baked at altitude, where everyone looks like a leather wineskin.

Jesus allowed me to half carry him up the mountain against my shoulder, which told me that he trusted me now. He didn't ask my name again. A subtle thing, but I took it as a sign of foreknowledge. I prefer strict anonymity. If you want perfect solitude, don't give out your name and never ask anyone else's. The local villagers didn't know my name even after years of proximity, and I forgot theirs as soon as I heard them, even the temple lad's. Sometimes I called him "Cat," because the boy's job was to catch the field rats attracted inside the temple by incense and oil.

After half a mile Jesus straightened up and walked on his own. A moment later he broke his silence. "I've heard of you by reputation. They say you know everything."

"No, they don't. They say I'm a stumbling idiot or a demon worshiper. Tell the truth. You saw me in a vision."

Jesus looked surprised.

I said, "You don't have to hide your knowledge from me." I gave Jesus a look. "Nothing in me is hidden. If you have eyes, you'll see."

He nodded. The trust between us was now complete.

Soon we reached my wind-battered hut. Once inside, I reached up into the rafters and brought down a packet wrapped in dirty linen rags.

"Tea," I said. "The real thing, not the dried barley stalks they boil up around here."

I put a pot of melted snow on the brazier to boil. It made a smoky heat, because for everyday purposes I burned dried dung for fuel. The floor of the hut was plastered with the same dung mixed with straw. Women came in every spring to put down a fresh layer.

Jesus squatted on the floor like a peasant and watched. If I really knew everything, I'd know whether Jesus had learned to sit that way among his people or on his long travels. After the pure air outside, my visitor's eyes watered from the smoke. I pulled aside one of the dried skins covering the window to let in a breeze.

"One gets used to it," I said.

I had no plans to write down this visit, even though I'd had only a handful like it in twenty years. To look at him, there was nothing special about Jesus. The superstition of the ignorant must make giants and monsters out of those with special destinies. Reality is otherwise. Were the eyes of Jesus as deep as the ocean and as dark as eternity? No. To the initiated there was something in his gaze that words couldn't

express, but the same is true of a desperately poor village girl seeing her newborn baby for the first time and bursting with love. One soul is every soul; only we refuse to see it.

By the same logic, all words are the words of God. People refuse to see that too. Jesus spoke like everyone else. But not everyone else spoke like Jesus, which is a mystery.

That first hour the two of us drank our black tea, brewed properly and strong in the visitor's honor, not weak the way I usually had it. My supply had to last all winter.

"I think I understand your problem," I said.

"You mean my reason for coming to find you?" asked Jesus.

"They're the same thing, aren't they? You found God, and it wasn't enough. It never is. There's no hunger worse than eternal hunger."

Jesus didn't look surprised. The right man would talk like this, without asking preliminary questions. As for me, I'd seen my share of feverish young men who came up the mountain with their visions. They burned out and left very quickly, taking their visions in ashes with them.

"It's one thing to find God," I said. "It's another to become God. Isn't that what you want?"

Jesus looked startled. Unlike the other feverish young men, he had found me not by his own will, but by being guided invisibly, held by the hand like a child.

"I wouldn't put it that way," he said soberly.

"Why not? You can't be worrying about blasphemy, not at this point." I laughed; it came out as a short, soft bark. "You've already had the word 'blasphemy' thrown at you a hundred times. Don't worry. Nobody's looking over your shoulder. When I shut the door, even the local gods have to keep out."

"Not mine."

After that exchange we didn't talk anymore, but sat silently as the teapot hissed on the brazier. Silence isn't a blank. It's the pregnant possibility of what is about to be born. Silence is the mystery I deal in. Silence and light. So I had no trouble recognizing the light that Jesus brought with him.

There was more, though. This one's road had been laid out before he was born. He was still young and had only caught a glimpse of it. But another might be able to see your whole road without tears. That was the reason Jesus had been guided through the snowstorm, to weave our two visions together.

He fell asleep sitting there, overcome with exhaustion. The next morning he began to tell his story to me. As the words poured out, the cold and dark of the hut made the tale seem unreal. But that was to be expected. Jesus long ago suspected that he might be living in a dream.

I heard his tale and saw much more in my mind. Listen to the story and judge for yourself.

2

THE TWO JUDASES

The booming voice filled the stone granary up to the rafters.

“What’s it going to be, brothers? The next time soldiers come marching into your village, are you going to be like the snake, which bites when it is stepped on? Or like the turtle, which hides in its shell, praying that it won’t be crushed underfoot?”

The speaker paused; he knew that fear ruled these Galileans. Although no taller than his listeners, he stood straight, while they hunched over like dogs waiting to be whipped. He stamped his foot, raising a cloud of chaff that glowed a dull gold by lantern light.

“You all know me by reputation,” he said. “I am Simon, the son of Judas of Galilee. What does that mean to you?”

“It means you’re a killer,” a voice called from the shadows. The granary was dark except for a single covered lantern. The Romans paid their informants well, and it was an offense punishable by death for rebels to gather in secret.

“Killer?” Simon scoffed. “I make righteous sacrifice.”

“You murder priests,” the same voice said.

Simon squinted to try to make him out more clearly in the dark. For every dozen men who dared to sneak off to a meeting, rarely even one actually joined the rebel cause. This night’s group huddled in an abandoned granary on the outskirts of Nazareth was no different. The Zealot’s tone grew harder.

“Murder is against God’s law. We eliminate collaborators. Whoever collaborates with Rome is an enemy of the Jews. An enemy of the Jews is an enemy of God. Do you deny this?”

Nobody called out a reply this time. Simon despised their timidity, but he also needed them. They were remote villagers haunted by the specter of starvation. Four out of ten children died before they were five. Families scratched out a bare living in the hills among twisted olive trees and parched wheat fields. It was the only existence they knew.

The man who had called Simon a murderer wasn’t Jesus, but Jesus was there. He stood next to his brother James, who was eager to join the rebels. They had argued about attending all morning.

“Just come and listen,” James had urged. “You don’t have to do anything.”

Jesus replied, “Going to their meetings is the same as doing something.”

Which was true as far as the Romans were concerned. But when James threatened to go without him, it was Jesus’s duty as older brother to come along. The stone granary was cold at night. It smelled of straw and rats’ nests.

Simon raised his hands in conciliation. “I know, all you want is to be left in peace, and I am bringing you a sword, the sword of Judas my father. You call us the ‘knife men’? Knives are only the beginning.”

With a dramatic flourish he pulled a legionary’s blade out from under his cloak. Simon could hear suppressed gasps. Even by the glimmer of a covered lantern they could tell that it was Roman steel. He held it high.

“Are we so afraid that just the sight of an enemy’s weapon makes us want to piss ourselves? No soldier dropped this sword. It wasn’t forgotten in a tavern after a drunken brawl. This was taken in hand-to-hand combat. By one of us...by a Jew.”

He stepped forward to the nearest man. “Go ahead, touch it, smell it. I’ve left enemy blood on it.” He raised his voice, staring hard at the men in the room. “Everyone touch it.”

Jesus grabbed at his brother’s arm. “Let’s go.”

“No!” James whispered, but his tone was fierce. Neither of them had ever laid hands on a sword. The only metal they knew was either a plowshare or a workman’s ax and chisel. Now the sword was coming closer.

“If you touch it now, can you ever untouch it?” Jesus asked. At the age of twenty, he had been considered a man for five years, but none of his brothers listened to him.

Simon watched with satisfaction as the weapon was passed around. A Roman sword was his strongest ploy. Rough hands could grasp what simple minds couldn’t. He wasn’t telling the truth about it, though—the sword had in fact been left behind in a tavern in Damascus and sold to the underground. The blood smeared on it was rabbit’s blood that he applied every few days, when he could trap one for dinner. But he had to tell these people something to stir them up. Whether they joined or ran away, they’d remember the sight of a captured sword with enemy blood.

Jesus was one of those who remembered. And he chose the details of this night as the beginning of the story he told me.

He was standing nervously at the back of the group. He wasn’t afraid to be there with a Zealot rebel, but he wanted James, his impetuous younger brother, to be afraid, for his own good.

The sword had reached them, and James handed it to Jesus. “Take it,” he whispered. The blade was heavier than it looked, short and snub-nosed in shape, which marked it as the weapon of a common foot soldier.

Jesus had seen stolen daggers since he was a boy, and occasionally a Roman scabbard or helmet. Looting from the occupiers was guaranteed to gain respect from other boys. He suspected that the sword was loot and not a battle prize.

“Bring it here,” Simon ordered.

Jesus hadn't realized that he was the last in line. He tried to pass the sword over the head of the farmer in front of him.

“No, you bring it,” the Zealot said.

Jesus did as he was told, keeping his eyes lowered.

This attempt to seem inconspicuous failed. “I want to see you after everyone else is gone,” Simon murmured in a low voice, fixing Jesus in his gaze.

Nobody heard exactly what he said, and James could hardly wait to find out. Jesus refused to satisfy his curiosity. There was only one way out of the granary, and Simon blocked it when the group disbanded. His short, squat, powerful body was as impassable as a boulder.

“I know you,” Simon said. “You are sons of David.” This was the kind of exaggerated flattery that worked with simple peasants.

Instead, Jesus said, “King's sons don't meet secretly in a barn. Why do you single us two out?”

“Because I have eyes to see. These others are Jews in name only, but you're not.”

“See what you will,” said Jesus. He could sense his younger brother growing excited and angry.

James burst out, “They're dying in our village every day. Why aren't the rebels doing something about it?”

“What's killing them?” said Simon.

“The Romans bleed us for taxes; we hardly had food for ourselves to begin with.”

Simon smiled. An opening. This was the moment that justified his hard, clandestine life. The rebels kept on the move throughout the occupied lands of Palestine, sleeping in barns or behind haystacks. Rarely did a farmer actually take a Zealot in. That risked having his house burned to the ground in retaliation.

Simon said, “You’ve got good questions. My father can answer them. Would you like to meet him? I can take you there tonight.”

James immediately wanted to seize the offer. Simon’s father, Judas of Galilee, was the soul of the rebellion. Black-haired as a bear, he came from Gamala, a village no bigger than Nazareth, five hundred people at most. Since he was born, James had seen the Zealots rise out of the ground like ghosts, striking everywhere, even inside the Temple in Jerusalem. But they weren’t ghosts. They were the children of Judas’s brain, and the arms of his will.

Simon saw the young man’s eyes flick nervously toward his older brother, who remained unmoved. “Judas is the greatest man alive, successor to the prophets,” James boasted.

The older brother spoke up. “Do we need another prophet of doom? That well’s not running dry. It fills back up every generation.”

“Look around. The Jews have already met their doom,” said Simon. “We don’t need a prophet to tell us that. We need one who can win our freedom—my father. Unless you are still dreaming of the messiah, who is always coming tomorrow.”

The older brother was stubborn. “You call your father our savior. What kind of savior uses destruction to end destruction?” he said.

Jesus didn’t need to explain his meaning. The Zealots had recently stepped up their campaign of terror. Their “knife men” had assassinated several high-ranking priests in Jerusalem, and now they threatened to murder any Jew who cooperated with the Romans, down to the poorest farmer.

Simon spread his hands. “I won’t argue with you. Come see for yourself. My father is hidden where the occupiers will never find him. He’s safer to visit than this place.”

He could feel the younger one wavering, but he was barely fifteen. It was the older one who would be the catch, if he could be won over.

Jesus hesitated. He knew that if he refused the invitation, James would never forgive him. The Zealots had bitterly divided the community. For every Jew who saw them as merciless killers, another saw them as heroes against the oppressor. James was leaning toward the second camp and would likely run off to join them if Jesus stood in his way. Then there was the law. The law of Moses did not forbid killing your enemy. The commandment not to kill had to be obeyed, but not when it came to survival, and weren't the Jews on the brink of extermination?

These weren't reasons enough for meeting the rebel chief. Torn as he was, Jesus couldn't abandon a family member, yet walking into the jaws of peril was just as bad. Then he spoke the hardest sentence he ever said.

"I am Jesus. This is my brother James. Take us where you want us to go."

JESUS DIDN'T KNOW in advance where they had hidden Judas of Galilee, but when Simon led them high up in the hills, walking narrow paths that could barely be seen in the quavery moonlight, he wasn't surprised. Jews had been rebelling for several generations, and before that the dense hills hid smugglers and their stashes of wine from Crete, dye from Tyre, and any other goods the Romans taxed exorbitantly. As they walked, Jesus could smell the resinous trees. He had sharp enough hearing to detect scurrying feet that froze in alarm as the three men passed by. Sliding scree made the going rough. James kept losing his footing and Jesus had to catch him each time he stumbled.

Simon would look over his shoulder. "All right back there?"

James nodded. To preserve his pride, he didn't ask him to slow the pace down.

Simon's sureness on the path revealed to Jesus that he and James were being led to a permanent sanctuary of the Zealots,

not one of their floating refuges. Which meant a cave. The Romans could scout any dwelling erected above ground. Insurrection was serious business, and their web of spies and soldiers was tight. But caves were another matter, being numberless in these hills and below ground.

Jesus wondered if he might have passed such a cave on his wanderings without ever discovering what it was. Two types of people lived in his village of Nazareth, people of the mountains and people of the roads, that is, those who stayed at home and those who traveled. Whoever planted wheat, tended olive trees, or herded sheep spent every waking hour in the hill country. (Travelers who had seen the snowcapped peaks of Lebanon would have scorned the Galilean hills as mountains, but they were heights nonetheless, and cold in winter.) Ever since Adam and Eve had been driven with tears and wailing out of Paradise, survival came from working in the dust. This was demanded by God as atonement. The people of the road were a small minority, men who walked from town to town, seeking whatever jobs they could find. Unless the Romans were building a villa somewhere outside the city of Sepphoris, a massive undertaking that created work for months on end, the traveling *tektons* were lucky to find four hours' labor after a half-day journey.

Jesus heard his father called a *tekton* when he was seven. Joseph had taken him on the road for the first time, and a fat, stumpy trader from Macedonia had used the word when he pointed to a broken wagon wheel, spitting out a curt order before he turned on his heels and walked away. Joseph began patiently to repair the twisted metal wrapped around the wheel shaft.

“That man doesn't like you. Why?” Jesus asked. He'd mistaken *tekton*, which meant “handworker” in Greek, for an insult, the way the Romans threw out *Judacus*. (They couldn't, or wouldn't, say the Hebrew word *Yehudi* properly when speaking to the Jews.) Joseph had his little boy hold the wheel steady.

“You’re not going to let that fall and kill us both, are you?” he said.

Jesus grimly shook his head and kept his body stiff until his knees felt like they would buckle. Then Joseph began to do what fathers eternally do once their sons become a certain age. He began to explain the world and their place in it.

“I’m a handworker, and now you are too. We lay stone one day, repair fallen walls, saw wood for beams. The next day we walk to where we are needed, and if we want to eat, we learn to lay a mud floor, build a sheep pen from field rocks, and measure a roof beam. God didn’t give us an easy life, but he gave us the whole wide world to see as we walk to the next job.”

Jesus listened and nodded. He had watched his patient, brawny-armed father do all those things since before he could remember. Joseph rose before dawn and left the house in his patched tunic and leather apron, returning as late as it took. Every handworker lived this way, and the stories they brought back home with them drew the only picture of the world that Nazarenes knew, except for the stories of Moses and Abraham and his descendants in the Tanach, the holy scriptures.

Since his family were people of the road, Jesus should have been bewildered by the crooked moonlit trails inscribed like writing from the hand of a senile scribe. But Jesus was rare. He was of the mountains and the roads both. James, on the other hand, had never ventured this high. He was panting hard, and his eyes nervously searched the sky for clouds that might cover the moon and throw the woods into pitch-blackness. Jesus heard a night sound, the whisper of bats’ wings close overhead.

“There’s a sheepfold up ahead, in a big cave,” he said.

Without looking back Simon nodded. It was common practice during the grazing months to put up a low stone wall at the mouth of a cave where the sheep could be penned up at night. Jesus had heard their murmuring, the nervous sound of meek animals dreaming of wolves. A moment later, the

sheepfold was in sight. The trail led directly to the mouth of a large cave where the embers of a fire glimmered orange in the dark.

Simon gave a quick glance backward warning the two brothers to be quiet. Being used to the mountains, he and Jesus could make their steps quiet at will, moving by stealth over fallen twigs and brush. James lacked this skill, and even though his tread only snapped a small twig here and there, the snap was loud enough to wake a half-sleeping shepherd.

“Hurry,” Simon hissed.

If Simon was afraid of the shepherds guarding their flock, then they weren't decoys. Since winter was bringing an end to grazing season, they were wrapped in layers of blankets, insulated from cold and the noise of intruders.

“In here,” Simon whispered.

At first there was no “here” to see, but then Jesus saw, through the thick underbrush, a second entrance to the cave. This mouth was barely knee high, a gaping blackness you could barely see against the night's own blackness. He and James got almost flat to the ground, following Simon's lead, and crawled into the opening. They kept crawling along a dirt floor for what seemed like fifty yards, although that was an illusion of the tight space, the darkness, and their raw nerves. In reality the crawl space opened up after twenty feet, and soon they could walk crouched over. This was an excruciating way to go, and Jesus knew that James must be grimacing with pain. But just then they saw torchlight up ahead and heard a new, strange sound—the chanting of prayers.

Prayers in a bandits' cave?

The tunnel opened up, and Jesus saw them, a circle of Jews sitting in a large cave. Heads covered in homespun shawls bobbed back and forth. The figures looked spectral against the dim rush torches whose wavering light made the cave walls shimmer like water.

Simon caught Jesus's questioning look. "It's not the appointed hour," he said. "But there's no law forbidding prayer, not when God is needed. For us, every hour is such a time."

None of the young men looked their way as they approached. James poked Jesus with his elbow, indicating an old man inside the circle. Judas the Zealot—for it had to be him—nodded at his returning son. The father was lean, with the same fierce brows as his son and a hawkish face. He sat on a coarse camel rug and wore no sign of rank. This plainness bespoke the old man's toughness. The fact that he didn't question Simon showed Jesus the rebel chief placed implicit trust in him. And the fact that his son rushed to kneel at Judas's feet indicated that Judas was revered.

"Come," Judas beckoned, and the two brothers drew nearer. James immediately prostrated himself on the stone floor. Jesus remained standing. Judas scrutinized him.

"Why aren't you dead?" he inquired abruptly.

Jesus sensed that the question was a ploy, but he answered it. "Because no one wants to kill me," he said.

Judas grunted. He touched James's head so that he could sit up, then waved the three of them to sit by his side. The circle of young men kept rocking and praying. Judas seemed impatient.

"Your reply is either simpleminded or cunning. I have no time for either. What I want to teach, you must learn quickly or not at all. Is that understood?"

He went on without waiting for a reply. "Why are any of us alive? What has made it possible for the Jews, a wretched people decimated by one conquest after another, to survive?"

"We fight back. We're willing to die," James blurted out.

Judas narrowed his eyes. "Think before you speak. Fighting back is how you get killed when you're outnumbered. Jews have been easy prey for all the generations since Abraham. God richly rewards us for our faith. We should have

been exterminated long ago, like locusts burned from a field with torches. But we weren't."

He turned to Jesus. "Give me hope. Can *you* think?"

"Only when necessary," Jesus said.

Judas liked this reply, which was more a parry with light swords than a real answer. "For the Jews," said Judas, "thinking has always been necessary. Now tell me straight, why are you not dead?"

Silently Jesus held his hands together in front of his face, then he opened them, palms up.

Judas burst out laughing. "See?" he cried to Simon. "You shouldn't call them all idiots. This one is clever." Then he turned back to Jesus. "You're right. Your hands show me a book, and that's how we Jews have survived. The Book."

Effortlessly and quickly Judas had seized their attention, something he'd clearly mastered. He fit the part of a rebel leader, skin leathery and tough, eyes fiery when he threw out challenges. His beard was uncut, with a wide streak of gray dividing it in two.

"My brother was also right," Jesus said. "Our people have fought to survive. Not all were killed."

"If the Book has allowed us to survive, what is destroying us now?" asked Judas.

James jumped in. "Straying from the law."

Jesus grabbed James by the collar of his rough wool cloak. "Let's go."

"No! Why?"

Jesus felt Judas's eyes on him, watching to see his next move. The young men in the circle weren't scholars. Each was armed with a knife beneath his prayer shawl, strapped close to the chest. Each was a *kanai*, one who is angry for the sake of God. If Jesus wasn't recruited, they wouldn't hesitate to kill him.

“I know why you brought us here,” he said to Judas.

“To teach you,” said the Zealot. His tone was no longer fiery, but his hawk eyes didn’t waver.

“No, to threaten us. We know where you hide now. We’ll have to keep your secret unless we want to be murdered.”

A wave of anger crossed Judas’s face. The praying circle grew ominously quiet. When Judas failed to recruit a rebel, he often created an adversary. There were no neutral parties in Judea, not now, probably not ever. But Judas hadn’t survived this long without being able to read men, and this one wasn’t ready to turn against him. He might even be malleable, with the right treatment.

Simon was surprised when his father said nothing, but bowed his head and pulled on his white prayer shawl. There wasn’t even a curt nod to dismiss the two brothers. But the son knew that his father must have his reasons, and without being ordered he led Jesus and James out of the cave.

ONCE THE BROTHERS got close to the sheepfold again, Jesus asked James to remove his sandals. His younger brother’s soles had been toughened by walking the roads, and he would be quieter going barefoot. The precaution worked at first. The sleeping shepherds, whose fire had gone completely out, could be heard snoring in the thin mountain air. But a few hundred yards later Jesus stiffened.

“That’s what I was afraid of,” he said.

“What?” asked James, who had heard nothing unusual.

“They’re following us.”

Jesus gazed at the sky. The moon was still out, but small racing clouds crossed it. He couldn’t risk leaving the trail. He saw that James wanted to run, and he held him back.

“Better to wait,” he said. Whoever Judas had sent after them knew the terrain too well.

Their pursuers were almost silent and descended on them by surprise not from behind, but from the front—two young men with knives out. Jesus was still holding James’s arm and felt the muscles trembling beneath his skin.

The bigger of the two men spoke up. “We’re not going to kill you. Show us your weapons, if you have any.”

“We don’t,” Jesus said.

The lead man nodded. “Then stick your arms out. We have to cut you.”

Jesus knew why. The rebels wanted to mark them so they could be recognized later. They could also use the marks to betray them to the Romans, in case a hunt began for Zealot sympathizers. “No,” he said. “Let us pass.”

The two rebels looked at each other. They broke out in a coarse laugh. “It’s not a request, boy,” the lead one said, even though he was probably only a year or two older than Jesus. “Bare your arm. Now!”

Dark as it was, Jesus could see his brother’s eyes widen with fear as the knife blade approached. James broke away from his grip and bolted.

“Get him!” the lead man shouted.

The second one had no trouble catching up with James, who stumbled, almost falling on his face before he’d run a dozen yards. The Zealot leaped on him. There was a brief struggle before the attacker pressed the knife blade at James’s throat and swiped it lightly in a crescent curve. It drew a faint line of blood that looked black in the moonlight. James shrieked with pain. He knew that the fatal stroke was coming.

“Stop!”

The attacker looked up. The cry hadn’t come from Jesus, but from a voice in the dark. A second’s hesitation, and then the figure of a third Zealot emerged from the shadows.

“Who told you to leave the hideout?” he barked. The man was older and taller than the first two, and he seemed to hold

authority over them. He glared, and the younger ones instantly lowered their knives.

“Clear out!”

As furtively as they had appeared, the two assassins disappeared back into the woods. Jesus heard a flurry of footsteps, then nothing. By now he was bending over James, who was trembling in shock.

“Don’t try to stand yet. Here, hold still.” Jesus tore a strip of linen from his long undergarment and wound it around his brother’s bleeding throat.

“It’s only a line,” the third Zealot said, examining the wound with a glance. “They hadn’t finished making the sign.”

Jesus nodded. The wound could have been caused by a slipped awl or chisel on the job. Once it was healed, it wouldn’t give away that contact had been made with the rebels. But James would never forget where it came from. Jesus helped him sit up.

Quietly he said, “If you join them, this is how it will be every day.”

It was a hard thing for James to hear at that moment, which was why Jesus said it. He had to break through his brother’s illusions about fighting.

Surprisingly, the tall Zealot standing over them agreed. “He’s right. Leave it. We’ll need fighters next year too, and five years after that.” He spoke with the authority of hard experience.

When James was able to stand shakily on his feet, the tall Zealot offered a shoulder to help him. Jesus reluctantly let him lead the way down the trail. The small racing clouds had coalesced into a thick layer, and the moon disappeared. The rebel said little until the lights of Nazareth—no more than guttering candles standing watch in a few windows—came in sight.

“We look bad, don’t we? Even worse than you suspected.”

Jesus didn't reply. "Just keep one thing in mind," the rebel said. "You have more in common with us than you do with them, no matter how bad we look. Will you think about that?"

"I have my own thoughts," said Jesus laconically. On the way down the mountain he began to wonder if the whole attack hadn't been staged. It would have been an easy way to get them to trust their rescuer, whose voice sounded cunning.

The tall Zealot blocked the trail. He was imposing, even as a silhouette in the dark. With his long unshorn locks, one could have mistaken him for a Philistine warrior returned from the torments of Gehenna.

"What are your thoughts, brother?" he asked Jesus.

"I think Judas is subtle. Perhaps subtle enough to stage an ambush, complete with a rescuer showing up at the last minute."

The Zealot grunted. "You're a rare one, aren't you?"

The night couldn't conceal his surprised look. He didn't argue back. Now they all knew that the "rescuer" was actually a recruiter.

Half an hour later they reached the main road. James had regained some strength and no longer needed propping up. The tall Zealot touched Jesus's shoulder.

"It was Simon's idea. If you come back again, don't trust him too far."

He turned to James. "I meant what I said about needing fighters next year. The fighting is only going to get worse." James hurried away, not looking back.

"I solved your problem," said the Zealot when Jesus hung behind.

"Yes. He won't be tempted again."

"Only evil tempts," the Zealot said. "That's not us."

"Then what do you call what you're doing?" Jesus had already started down the road to catch up with his brother. The

Zealot kept pace for a few yards.

“I call it salvation,” he said. “Anyway, I’ll keep them off you. And if you run into trouble, just give them my name. Everyone knows me. I’m Judas. The other Judas.”

Jesus was far enough down the road that he barely heard these words. The other Judas could no longer be made out in the dark, even as a silhouette.

3

GOD ON THE ROOF

Jesus woke up to the most dangerous smell in Nazareth—smoke. He leaped out of bed and ran outside, pulling on his tunic and cloak as he went. This wasn't the warm smell of his mother's bread baking in the hearth. It was acrid and sharp, the smell of disaster.

Jesus saw the curling black trail coming from his roof. He would have cried the alarm, but at that instant he caught sight of a ladder leaning against the wall. He scrambled up, and when his head appeared over the roofline, he saw Isaac, the village blind man squatting beside a small fire of pitch pine that he'd built on the flat mud surface. In one hand Isaac held a knife, in the other a small rabbit trembling with terror.

“No, don't.”

Hearing Jesus's voice, the blind man turned his head. “You need a sacrifice,” he said firmly. He held up the rabbit. “I had one of my boys snare it this morning.” Isaac's wife ministered to him, blind as he was, faithfully, keeping his tunic spotless and his beard long but neat, like a patriarch's.

“What I need is for the house not to burn down,” said Jesus as he climbed onto the roof and walked over to the makeshift altar of twigs and sticks.

Nobody knew what afflicted Isaac. He went blind almost overnight, a calamity for his wife and two sons, neither old enough to take to the road. They herded a handful of sheep while their father stayed at home.

When Jesus tried to take the rabbit from Isaac's hands, he resisted. “You've brought trouble to this house. I know where

you went, I know who you saw.”

Jesus hesitated. A sacrifice was the usual way of dealing with God’s displeasure, and since going blind, Isaac had become obsessed with God. In his affliction he had been given a gift, second sight, or so everyone believed.

“No sacrifice for now, just a talk,” said Jesus. He sat down beside Isaac, who reluctantly let him have the trembling animal. Jesus kicked the burning sticks and twigs, which scattered and went out. “Maybe God has something else in mind. The Zealots could be right. Maybe we’ll perish unless we live by the sword.”

“God always has something in mind,” said Isaac. “Something mysterious, like choosing a people, but then giving them no power. Who has ever figured that one out?” His voice turned more serious. “Then there’s you. You almost have the gift. Almost can be worse than not at all.”

Jesus knew that people said this about him, that he was like Isaac, but without the excuse of blindness.

“What do you see?” Isaac asked. “Something has happened. If I can sense it, you must.”

Jesus didn’t want to answer. He and James had crept in after midnight. Even though the whole family slept in one room, nobody woke up. The two brothers crawled into the pallet they shared, a wool mattress stuffed with straw and laid out on the floor. James, exhausted from fear, fell asleep immediately. Jesus couldn’t sleep. He stared at the stars through the one small window that was cut in the wall of the stone house.

The same anxious thought kept racing through his mind. Judas—the other Judas—couldn’t protect him. If the Romans wanted to track down rebel sympathizers, nobody could stop them. It was necessary to be quiet and invisible. Easy enough. They had all had plenty of practice at that—centuries.

“Let’s go down,” he said to Isaac. “We can eat together.” His mother hadn’t been in the house when the smoke woke

him up. She must have gone to the town cistern for water, but Mary would have left behind a breakfast for him of flatbread and crushed olives.

Isaac shook his head. "I'm staying up here. God is here."

Jesus smiled. No matter where he was, the blind man habitually muttered, "God is here." It annoyed people. Jesus was one of the few who took an interest.

"Tell me, rabbi," he said, using the word as a compliment, not a tease. "How is God here?"

Isaac held his hands up. "I feel warmth. There's a glow in the back of my eyes. Isn't that God?"

It would do Jesus no good to protest, as anyone else would, that it wasn't God, but the sun. Isaac would only smile secretly and say, "Yes, and the sun is God, no?"

Jesus watched the last wisp of smoke die out from the scattered altar; he let the rabbit run around the roof, but it quickly disappeared down the ladder. He said, "Why aren't we dead?" The same question Judas of Galilee had asked him in the cave. "Is it the Book?"

Isaac shrugged. "If you stamp on an anthill and pour oil on it to burn it out, you will kill most of the ants. But a few always run away. The Jews are like that."

"You think the Jews are only ants?"

"No, there's a difference. The ones who run away think that God loves them more than the others."

Jesus gave a crooked smile. "It's our curse, isn't it?"

They both knew what he meant. Worrying about God's inscrutable ways was a very subtle curse. A pathetically insignificant people were in love with destiny. To a Jew, nothing could be an accident, anything could be a sign. A sparrow couldn't fall without somebody asking if it was God's will.

But Jesus's attention had wandered. In his anxiety over the house burning down, he'd overlooked something. He had woken up alone. Even if his mother had gone to the cistern and his father had gone to find work, where were his younger brothers and sisters?

"Come," he said. "We've got to find my family." There was no need to lead Isaac by the hand. He could clamber down a ladder faster than Jesus.

"I should have told you," said Isaac. "Everybody's run away."

"Why didn't someone wake me up?" Jesus asked anxiously. The whole village would run away only if garrisoned Roman soldiers were marching into Nazareth. Urchins on the road served as lookouts, racing ahead to warn the village that the great beast, the Roman army, was lumbering its way on its hundred feet.

"Everyone was in a panic. I was sent back to fetch you," said Isaac.

"So why didn't you?"

"No time to talk. We have to get to the woods."

Jesus took Isaac's hand and led him over the rough ground as fast as the blind man could run. He didn't blame Isaac for getting distracted. God did that to people who had the gift.

They wouldn't get far if the Romans were anywhere nearby. But Jesus knew of a secret place, a hollow under fallen trees. The villagers, who only went into the woods for fuel or escape, wondered why Jesus went there to wander. It was simply added to the list of his strange behaviors.

The hollow was large enough to conceal them both, and they had reached it just in time. The house of Joseph stood on the edge of Nazareth. They could see it from their hiding place, and now Roman soldiers in cadres of four and five were scattering out from the center of town. They carried torches.

“How many people will they take?” Isaac whispered. From the short distance he could hear the crackle of the torches.

“It depends on how scared they want us to be,” Jesus said grimly.

The soldiers tossed a torch into a house not far from Joseph’s. Even though the walls were made of fieldstone held together with mud plaster, it went up quickly once some oily rags were tossed inside. The straw beds caught fire first and lit the low wooden beams overhead.

Jesus felt sick. But the Romans wouldn’t destroy the whole town—they needed the taxes. Burning down a few houses would send enough fear through the people. This was low-grade retaliation for the meeting in the granary the night before. The next step would involve dragging someone away to be tortured. But that was the limit. If rebel sentiment flared up again, the Romans would come back, this time by night when everyone was asleep. A few would survive the fire, but the Romans were used to that. A few ants always managed to escape.

JESUS DIDN’T HEAR the screams of the man who died. He was Hezekiah, old and crippled, an enfeebled patriarch. His family didn’t want to leave him behind, even in a panic, but he insisted on taking his chances. The Romans wouldn’t care about one old man. That day only three houses had been burned to the ground. As Providence would have it, Hezekiah’s was the first. A charred body was pulled from the ashes and wrapped in a winding sheet. From a distance the wailing of women reached Jesus’s ears. It was a time for everyone to gather in mourning, but he used it to get away. He had a secret ritual to perform.

Without being noticed, he walked to the *mikvah*, the ritual bathing place outside town. A natural spring was located there, and generations ago a cistern had been dug around it. The Torah demanded that impurity be washed away, but not in a

tub or sink filled by hand. Only fresh running water fulfilled the law.

Jesus approached warily. If a woman was inside the mikvah taking her monthly bath, it would be trouble. This was almost entirely a woman's place, and men stayed away. The mystery of a woman's cycle was not for the righteous to observe or think about. But all the women would be at the funeral, so he was safe for a few hours.

Steps carved into the natural rock led down to a small chamber shaped like a box, just large enough for one bather. Jesus stripped off his tunic and wrapped a cloth around his waist. The water was at his feet, deep and clear. Even in the dry season the bath was always full.

Jesus had brought a small clay vessel of pure olive oil. He dabbed it on his forehead and stepped into the water, which came up to his waist. It was bracing cold in the winter, and he submerged himself quickly. He came up with a gasp and spoke his prayer out loud.

“God, forgive my transgression. Show me my sin and lift it from me.”

Jesus saw a shadow before he saw the man who cast it. As he whirled around, the intruder said, “I can do a lot more for you than he can. I can save you.”

Jesus scowled. “I don't want your kind of salvation.”

The intruder was Judas, the tall Zealot. He stood on the platform where Jesus had dropped his clothes, and in the cramped chamber there was no room for two people—he had trapped Jesus in the water.

“Don't worry. I'm not going to shout for anybody. I know why you're here, and it's not because you think you're a woman.”

Judas's voice was low and calm. He sat down on the platform on top of the fallen tunic and cloak, making the point that Jesus was going nowhere. He said, “You're going to have to shiver a while longer until we finish our talk.”

Without waiting for a reply, Judas continued. "I've had you looked at. Everyone says you're strange. But we both know that." Judas smiled and waved a hand. Any man caught in a mikvah was strange. Or holy. He narrowed his eyes.

"First things first. The world isn't coming to an end. Do you believe me? Or are you as crazy as people say?"

"I believe I'm freezing. Go away. It's because of you and your meeting that an innocent man died."

"You're lying," Judas said coolly. "If you thought it was us, why are you here making atonement? You think that somehow you're to blame, isn't it? That because of your sin the soldiers invaded. I'd call that megalomania." Suddenly Judas grinned. "We need more of that."

"Enough. Stand aside." Jesus had gotten over his embarrassment at being discovered and was getting angry. It wasn't unlawful for him to be at the mikvah. Everyone, men and women, bathed in the pools around the Temple in Jerusalem before entering the sacred place.

He tried to step up onto the platform, but Judas pushed him back. "So what are we going to do about your sins? Are you one of those weird jobs who are so guilty that the world must end, all because of them? Answer."

The two glared at each other. The water was cold; Judas stood his ground. Jesus was not going to get out unless he answered.

"No, I don't believe the world's coming to an end. The people who believe that are desperate. They can't see any other way out."

"I can."

With a swift gesture Judas pulled a curved knife from his sash. In the confined space it was no more than a foot from Jesus's naked body. He backed away, but Judas leaned forward, extending the knife.

"Here's your escape. Isn't that what you want?"

He turned the blade around and offered the handle to Jesus. Jesus shook his head, remembering the sword that Simon had waved in the granary. This was the same cheap trick.

“Take it,” Judas insisted. “You’ll be a different man. Has God done anything for you? You think you want forgiveness, but you’re lying to yourself. You want strength, because you’re sick and tired of being the lamb. What good are lambs except to lie on the altar and have their throats cut?”

Jesus’s heart raced at the sight of the weapon, and not just because Judas might stick it in him. Without knowing why, he held out his hand and grabbed the knife handle. Judas nodded, barely smiling.

“Hold it. Feel it. I’m not asking you to be an executioner. I’m asking you to take your power back. What right did anyone have to steal it from you?”

Abruptly the Zealot cut himself off; he turned and ran back up the steps. Jesus felt his muscles relax. He climbed out of the water and put on his clothes, the whole time still clutching the knife. When he emerged from the mikvah, Judas was standing in the sun by the entrance.

Jesus said, “Take it back. I don’t want the power to kill.”

Judas shook his head. “What kind do you want? The power to be killed? Well, congratulations. You have plenty of that.”

Jesus felt his face turn red. When he held the knife out, Judas knocked it to the ground with a swipe of his hand. “Pick it up when you’re ready to be a free man. Or leave it there to rust. That’s what a slave would do.”

Judas didn’t wait to see what effect his scorn was having. He had already turned on his heels and started down the rocky path. Jesus watched as his visitor suddenly broke off to the left and disappeared into the shadow of the pines. A moment later he was gone from sight.

Hezekiah’s corpse had been taken to the house of the dead. It was too low and too small to accommodate the entire village, and as Jesus approached the ones gathered outside,

mostly younger boys, turned their heads—but only for a second. They were used to Jesus, whose wandering habits had earned him a nickname, “the stray.”

He stopped and kept apart. On the roof some men were praying, Isaac among them. Their bodies swayed, and the air was smudged with the ash they rubbed in their faces. Isaac, however, had his sightless eyes open and his face turned upward.

As part of his gift, Isaac could see the angel of death when he approached. “A glorious thing, with clattering wings and a falcon’s head,” he told him. “He shrieks like a hawk too, to attract the soul to God. Dying souls are afraid and need to be shown the way.”

The blind man and “the stray” had conversations like this when they were alone. Now Isaac’s face began to glow; he threw his arms into the air. He saw what he saw, the one angel the Jews could count on when the others seemed to desert them. Jesus half believed that he saw him too. The air shimmered over the house of the dead, but not from summer heat this time of year. It would settle everything if he could be as certain as Isaac, but Jesus might only be imagining.

What he wasn’t imagining was the knife whose weight he felt in the palm of his hand. He had had enough of being a slave, and if Judas knew where the road to freedom led, the choice was clear. Jesus knew he could never kill, but as the Zealot said, being killed was a skill the Jews had mastered all too well.

4

THE FIRST MIRACLE

On the way to Jerusalem the two travelers talked about miracles. “Would you like to become a *magus*?” Judas asked, using the term that the Romans applied to a wonder-worker.

Jesus looked baffled. “Why?”

“It’s going to take one to lead the Jews,” Judas said. “When everything else fails, try miracles. The first miracle is to get people to believe in your powers.”

“I don’t have powers,” Jesus said.

“You don’t actually have to possess them. Is it a miracle when bread rises? It is if you’ve never seen it before.”

They had been on the road for three days and were only a day away from the capital. Judas was overbearing and full of ambitious plans. He ordered Jesus to stand guard while he slept, sometimes all night. He spent hours ignoring his young follower—that was the only way he saw Jesus—planning what would happen when they reached Jerusalem. Then, as Galilee receded behind them, Judas became more relaxed. The threat of capture was much lower in the south, where the spy system of the Romans was still weak.

“There’s something weird about you,” Judas said. “You could already pass as a magus. I’ve heard talk.”

Jesus fixed his eyes on the ground. “What do they say?”

They were passing on foot through a stretch of desert with only parched underbrush all around. Judas pointed up ahead to a lone thorn tree. “Let’s rest.”

The tree's shade was thin and hot, but the travelers welcomed it. A goatskin water bottle was passed between them while Judas related a story told behind Jesus's back. Mary, his mother, saved figs over the winter in a jar to hand out in springtime at Passover. The village children loved her for it, but one year when Mary opened the jar, green mold had gotten inside. The figs were ruined, except for two on the top.

"They say you found your mother crying, and you told her to invite the village children anyway," said Judas. He eyed Jesus sharply. "Is any of this true?" he asked.

Jesus was smiling faintly. "So far."

"When the children came, you were seated by the door. In your lap was a basket covered with a napkin. You reached under the napkin and pulled out a fig for each child. They were delighted, and you never ran out of fruit. But anyone allowed to peek under the napkin would have always seen only two figs, no matter how many had already been taken."

"That's true," Jesus admitted.

"So the tale of a miracle began to spread," Judas said. He narrowed his eyes. "You've never heard this?"

"I was twelve," Jesus said mildly. "Twelve-year-olds have imaginations."

"What does that mean?"

Jesus hesitated. He knew he was about to fuel a streak of deception in Judas. Then he explained. "At that age I sat and dreamed all the time, and one thing I dreamed about was the wonders performed in the time of Moses. I asked myself why I, and everyone else I knew, had never seen any miracles. My mother had pulled out her jar of figs for Passover week, as usual."

"And they weren't rotten," said Judas, knowing full well where the story was going.

"I spread the rumor that they were," Jesus said. "When my mother invited everyone, people were confused, but they came

anyway. It's not hard to fit a basket with a false bottom. I kept two figs on top and reached under for the rest."

Judas burst out laughing. "You cheated! I knew you were a magus. I just didn't know that you discovered it so young."

"Does it please you that I cheated?" Jesus asked. "I felt important for a few days, but my mother found out about the rumor of moldy figs. She didn't scold me. The look in her eyes was my punishment."

Judas was not pleased anymore. He poked at the sandy ground under the thorn tree, lost in thought. When they got back on the road, he scowled for a while before saying, "Just remember, we still need a wonder-worker. The Jews are slaves, and slaves don't have a clue how to free themselves. The best they can manage is an uprising, and those are doomed before they begin."

They took turns riding the donkey that Judas had procured for the long journey. He'd given Jesus a new pair of flimsy sandals, warning him, "Save these for the city. We have to blend in, and your road shoes are a dead giveaway that you walk the road." He ordered Jesus to clip his beard short so he wouldn't look like a bear who'd escaped from the hills.

On the very edge of Jerusalem, the stone-paved highway was packed, a traveling bedlam of traders, pilgrims, beggars, and handworkers seeking God and fortune in the capital. Jesus saw his first monkey, an Arabian horse, and pygmy goats no higher than his knee. He saw travelers decorated with earrings, neck rings, nose rings, and more exotic baubles. For every gold fillip, there was a bandit by the side of the road keeping an eye out to snatch it. When Jesus went to sleep at night rolled in a blanket, there were sounds of drunken laughter and piercing screams. He marveled to think that Rome must be ten times as madcap.

"I know what I'd call a miracle," said Judas. "If we survive this mission."

"Will we?" Jesus asked.

It was the first Judas had spoken about any mission or its dangers. Even now he kept it cloaked in mystery, saying, “Don’t worry. It’s taken care of.” When the gates of the city appeared in the distance, Jesus gaped. It had been years since his parents took him to the ancient home of the faith. He had fantasized as a young boy that the gates would be solid cedar, so massive that the wood’s perfume could be smelled half a mile away, and even farther away a pilgrim would see glints of light flashing from their gilded surface.

Judas shook him out of his reverie. “You need to know everything,” he said, and unfolded their mission in an undertone as they rested by the roadside.

Simon the Zealot was sending them on a lethal mission, to stab the high priest of the Temple. It was time, he said, to aim terror at the heart of the collaborators, not low-ranked rabbis, but the Sanhedrin, the high court itself. Judas told Jesus about going back to the rebels’ hideout a few days after confronting him in the mikvah. Sitting on the cave floor, he listened silently as he was given his orders.

“The Sanhedrin convenes in the Temple every day to hear cases. There are twenty-three judges on ordinary days, but don’t worry about them. Focus on the high priest and chief judge,” said Simon. “Cut off the head and the whole beast will die.”

Judas paused. He saw Jesus’s body stiffen. Like any provincial, he was in awe of the Temple and had hardly dared to step within a hundred feet of the priest caste. Striking the high priest would be no different from striking at God.

“You consider the whole court traitors?” Jesus asked quietly.

“They are the only ones who can put the king on trial, and what is Herod but a whore of Rome?” Judas said. “Yet the Sandedrin does nothing.”

“Is that the same as betraying God?” Jesus asked.

“What do you mean?”

“When we met, Simon said that the Book must be upheld, which means obeying the laws of God. Isn’t that what these priests and judges do?”

“You’re not looking at them right.” Judas was growing impatient. “Collaborating with the enemy is a crime against God.”

“What choice do they have?” Jesus said. “Priests are the most visible among the Jews. If they don’t cooperate, they will be killed. I’ve made you angry, but I have to understand. A priest may bow to the Romans outwardly, but love God in his heart. All of us do the same thing. What makes us less guilty?”

Judas could hardly contain his anger, but he let Jesus continue.

“I came with you because something has to be done about the suffering in the land. But if I find that you aren’t righteous, helping you would only add to that suffering. How am I wrong?”

Although he seemed on the verge of erupting, Judas spoke in a low, even tone. “You can’t betray the mission. I vouched for you. This is your test. I’m the only thing that stands between you and what the Zealots will do if we fail.”

“My test is murder?” asked Jesus.

“Listen to me. If we succeed without being arrested, even Simon and his father will trust us. We become lieutenants and then captains.”

Jesus was stunned. He had lied and prepared in secret to leave Nazareth. His family could be told nothing, for fear that the Romans would torture them if he were captured. His furtive movements were noticed, but then there was a piece of luck. The family of Hezekiah, the old man burned in the fire, wanted to offer a sacrifice at the Temple. His wife was old and enfeebled; the sons couldn’t leave their scrawny flock. Jesus stepped forward and offered to make the journey for them. His benevolence was greeted with tears; the old woman fell to the floor and embraced his feet.

Stifling his guilt, Jesus tied a clutch of coins into a small pouch around his waist—even though they were mostly copper, these represented half his savings. He somehow calmed his mother’s fears and his brother James’s suspicions. On the last night he slept fitfully, and getting up at dawn, he jumped when his mother said, “Where’s Judas?”

She meant the youngest son in the family of Joseph, who was five. The only sister who was within earshot, Salome, ran to fetch the boy. Jesus forced himself to eat breakfast, sunk in gloom. Mary asked no questions; their eyes didn’t meet. Then the family crowded in the doorway to watch Jesus leave; he could feel their eyes on his back until he was out of sight. He had no chance to say good-bye to his father, who had left early to find work, or his other brothers, Joses and Simon, who no longer lived at home.

Now he turned to Judas. “I can’t become a murderer, not even to save our people.”

Judas gave him a crooked smile. “You won’t murder anyone. That’s the beauty of it.”

Jesus felt the color rise in his cheeks. “What are you talking about?” he demanded.

“Calm down.” Judas reached into his sack, pulling out bread and olives and a scrap of dried lamb. “Eat. This is the last of the provisions,” he said coolly.

Jesus knocked the food out of his hands and jumped to his feet. “I trusted you!” he shouted. “You tempted me with freedom, and now you lead me to sin?”

He was amused at Jesus’s consternation. “What are you now, a rabbi?” he said dryly. “It’s not for you to say that an eye for an eye isn’t just.”

“Then you be the rabbi. Tell me what is just.”

“No, I don’t aim that high. Just trust me one more day. You trusted me to save you from the Zealots once before. I can do it twice.”

Judas examined the bread that Jesus had knocked into the dust. Judas sniffed at it and threw it away. “Now we’ll go hungry.” He got to his feet. “I told you we won’t be killing anybody. We’ll just appear to. Are you coming?”

Judas picked a bramble switch to use on the donkey. Jesus watched him, wondering if he could still run away. But they both knew he couldn’t. Judas couldn’t protect him if they abandoned the mission.

“All right,” Jesus said reluctantly. “What now?”

Judas mounted the donkey and kicked it into motion. “We’re going to perform the first miracle, the one that gets people to believe in our powers.”

THE TEMPLE WAS bewildering and huge, a city within a city. Its walls enclosed the only perfect safety the Jews had ever known. When they congregated there, the outside world disappeared. In its place had been built a promise of God’s glory come to earth. Gleaming white walls dazzled the eye; shaded colonnades provided peace and shelter. The inner sanctum, the Holy of Holies, was the smallest part, but the richest, because there the devout faced God.

Surrounding the Temple court was a vast stone colonnade. Jesus and Judas merged into the crowd, which clustered around money changers and sellers of offerings. Few were rich enough to sacrifice the sheep and bulls required by sacred law. All they could afford was a minor offering of cereal grains or turtledoves.

Jesus eyed the birds hanging in wicker cages. Feeling the pouch of coins tied around his waist, he asked how much a single dove would cost. The seller eyed him disdainfully. “I don’t cheat the customer,” he said sourly before even naming a price. “If you want a bird for free, go back to the farm.”

Judas pulled at Jesus’s arm, impatient to move on. The colonnade enclosed a vast courtyard where thousands of people could stand. Jesus had always seen it jammed with

worshippers shoulder to shoulder. For poor people like his family, the law demanded one visit a year to offer sacrifice on Passover, but Joseph couldn't always manage to bring them all. Being the oldest son, Jesus had come three times, James once.

The first time, when he was thirteen, he saw Paradise. The smells were intoxicating, the air heavy with cedar and myrrh. He asked his father why there were no lush plantings of the kind that once adorned the Temple of Solomon, not even a tree.

“It was left barren to symbolize the desert that the Jews had to cross to reach the land that God would give them,” Joseph said. “Or maybe it stands for grief.”

There was a lot to grieve over. Inside the innermost and most sacred place stood a single gold, oil-burning lamp, replacing the dazzling array of gold that once filled the Temple of Solomon. Then unspeakable calamity fell. The Temple of Solomon was razed by Babylonian invaders. To crush the spirit of the Jews, everything sacred was smashed or looted. There was no Ark of the Covenant anymore, no scrap of the manna that God had miraculously sent when his children wandered for forty years in the wilderness with Moses. Meager as they were, the Jews were decimated, the remnants dragged into captivity in Babylon. When they were finally allowed to go home, the trek to Jerusalem lasted for months. But the first thing every Jew who survived the trek did was to join in the rebuilding of the Temple.

It was hard to forget their sacrifices, even though they took place five hundred years earlier. The holy site made Jesus feel less and less enthusiasm for the rebel conspiracy, while for Judas the same sights aroused contempt. He kicked aside a boy who was desperately trying to hold back two sheep that his father had brought for sacrifice. The animals had panicked and were trying to bolt. The ground was littered with sheep and cow dung.

“What kind of people are we? Look at them. They step in filth to get to the altar. That’s their path of purification,” Judas said with scorn. He took Jesus by the arm; it was time to reconnoiter.

The judgment hall where the Sanhedrin sat was a separate structure that faced into the great courtyard, but it had another entrance on the outside facing the city. This was to signify that the court was sanctioned by religion and yet also held civil authority.

“Or maybe it’s a warning that the judges are two-faced,” Judas said. Judas did his scouting swiftly, moving his sharp gaze around every corner of the site. He took Jesus to the city entrance, to make sure it offered an easy escape. He was disappointed. The entrance was small and packed with angry petitioners pushing and shoving to get inside.

Judas asked nothing of Jesus and said nothing to him. The time was early morning, before the judges had arrived, so the inner chamber, the actual seat of judgment, was deserted. The crowd jostling at the door would be twice as large once court was in session. Judas decided not to wait.

“But we haven’t seen how many guards there will be,” said Jesus.

Judas seemed unconcerned. “Guards are for arresting people. They won’t be interested in us unless we commit a crime.”

Jesus had showed patience, allowing his companion to preserve an air of mystery around his plans, but no longer. He stopped on the Temple steps and demanded an explanation.

“There are some crimes that only look like crimes,” said Judas cryptically. He held out his hand. “Here, give me your money.”

“Why?”

“Just hand it over. What happened to trust?”

Jesus backed away, pressing his hand over the hidden pouch of coins. Every move Judas had made up to this point wasn't a test of trust, but of power. Judas sensed that he had finally gone too far. "I'll tell you everything, but you can't back out. Agreed?" he said.

Jesus shrugged instead of agreeing, but Judas was satisfied. "We aren't going to stab anybody. We're going to be magi and make it all look real. Nobody will have a reason to arrest us, but the Zealots will think we've succeeded. It's a brilliant plan, really, if I have to say so."

His sly smile didn't reassure Jesus. Judas ignored his doubting expression. "We're going to take your coins and buy a cage of turtledoves. Then I'll drag you into the court shouting that you stole it from me. We'll make a ruckus and charge right up to the judges."

"They won't let us get that far," Jesus protested.

"We'll be moving too fast for anybody to react. By the time the guards take a run at us, we'll be close enough."

"For what?"

"For this." Judas's smile deepened as he pulled out a small glass vial filled with a greenish yellow syrup. "It's poison. I'll smear it on a thorn, and once I get close enough to a judge, I'll scratch his arm. That's all it takes."

Jesus was alarmed. "So you're going to kill one of them after all?"

"With a prick? Of course not. But it's a fast poison, and he'll go into fits almost immediately. In the meantime, I'll put on a show. The guards will be on top of me. As they drag me away, I'll go crazy. I'll wave my arms and curse the judge, bringing down God's wrath. At that moment the poison will make him seize and thrash about. If we're lucky, he'll keel over and pass out."

If not a brilliant plan, it was an impressive one to Jesus. Everyone's eyes would be transfixed by the show of a magus's curse working before their very eyes. The priest would recover

in a matter of minutes, saving them from prison. They might even walk away if Judas talked fast enough.

But Jesus had his doubts. “Simon will find out that we didn’t kill anybody.”

“So what? I’ll say we stabbed a priest, but missed a vital area, in all the uproar. Nobody will be able to contradict me.”

“But I thought you wanted to kill one,” said Jesus.

“Don’t be simple. I’m using the Zealots. That’s why I need you. You’re like me. You can see how idiotic their schemes are. It’s only a matter of time before the Romans wipe out every last one of them. You think an empire survives if it tolerates rebellion?”

Jesus was wary. If Judas was using the Zealots, he was just as likely to be using him. “Why should I do what you say?” he demanded.

“Because when you said you wanted to see the suffering in the land end, you meant it. Not like most of those bastards. They’ve been rotting in caves since before either of us were born, and when they come out, the Romans pick them off. Besides, no matter how many collaborators the rebels knife in the back, do you see anyone’s life improving?”

It was a powerful question, to which Jesus had no good answer.

JUDAS PLANNED THEIR staged miracle for the next morning. They spent the night wrapped in their cloaks under a viaduct. It was a filthy, stinking place, and as soon as he was sure that Judas had fallen asleep, Jesus got up to wander the streets. The air was freezing, and at any moment a bandit could jump out of the shadows, but he had to think. One small thing that Judas had said stuck in Jesus’s mind: *You’re like me.*

Was he? In every side alley he passed, Jesus saw heaps of dirty rags with people sleeping under them like moles in their burrows. Open sewage ran in the gutters. Suddenly a cough

made him turn around. A boy with his feet wrapped in burlap had sneaked up behind him in the dark. The boy was too frightened of strangers to speak up, but he held out a bony hand as small as a stray dog's paw.

"I'm sorry," Jesus mumbled.

"Just a scrap, master." The boy's bulging eyes and the parchment skin over his face said that he was starving. It had taken him a moment to understand the dialect of Aramaic that Jesus spoke in.

"I'm not your master," Jesus said gently, thinking to himself, *I could be in your place. I don't know why I'm not.*

Instead of walking away, the boy grew angry. "You're lying. You came here with food. They all do."

Jesus was about to say, "I ate it all," which was the simple truth. At that moment it seemed like a sin. He crouched down to the boy's level. "Where's your family? Do you have a name?" The boy shrugged and looked away.

Suddenly Jesus was startled. In the darkness, the beggar boy's profile looked exactly like that of his younger brother, Joses, one of the two who had left home. Jesus reached into his tunic, bringing out the smallest copper coin in the pouch hidden there. It wasn't his money to give away, but he handed it to the boy.

What he got back wasn't gratitude. The boy shoved him hard, taking advantage of Jesus's crouching position. He was thrown off balance, and instantly the boy was on top of him, scrabbling with his clawed hands for the rest of the jingling coins.

"Get off me!" Jesus cried. The boy was fierce, gasping and grunting like an animal as he scratched at Jesus's skin.

The boy had no chance against a man, and once Jesus recovered from his surprise, the boy had to flee. This he did, quickly and silently, on his ragged feet. Jesus didn't run after him. It took a moment before he wanted to get up, because he

was overwhelmed with a welling sorrow. The sorrow of self-betrayal.

Jesus had secretly made a pact with himself when he was barely older than this beggar boy. Nothing fascinated him but God, yet he promised himself that he would live and work like everyone else, because that was a duty imposed by God. One day, as the law prescribed, he would marry and raise children. But being in the world didn't mean he'd have to be of the world. Like Isaac the blind, Jesus could look where no one else could, toward the divine place. Where that place was he had no idea, which involved another promise. He wouldn't accept tales of God's kingdom, a magical realm above the clouds furnished with a throne of blazing white marble, whiter than the kind the richest Roman could afford to line his lavatorium with.

Jesus had no right to question scripture. He couldn't even read and write properly other than signing his name in Hebrew and Latin letters, making out the alphabet, and piecing words together syllable by syllable. But the scriptural scheme was too neat—starve in this world so that God can usher you into a palace when you die. In that regard he felt the same as Judas. Jesus could see why people suffered even when they themselves didn't. They suffered from hopeless fantasies about God's love, when all he showed them, if you were brutally honest, was indifference and contempt.

Jesus wiped away a streak of blood on his side where the street urchin had scratched him and wearily got to his feet. Being in the world but not of it wasn't working. He shed too many tears for someone who should be detached. Judas had a plan to get people to pay attention, and if it took a false miracle to carry it out, that was better than no plan at all.

5

THE HOLY WOMAN

Early in the morning, when the city's shutters were still closed, Judas and Jesus made their way to the Temple and bought a cage of doves under the colonnade. Judas haggled and got a good enough price from the Syrian merchant that there were a few coins left over, which they spent on bread. It was a paltry breakfast, hardly enough to calm the gnawing in Jesus's stomach. They ate squatting on the street outside the Temple gates. Jesus kept quiet and after a while handed half his bread to Judas.

Judas took it without thanks. "You're not going through with this, are you?"

Jesus shook his head.

"Why not? Because you think it's ridiculous? Great events begin this way, by attracting attention. People can be played. They want to be played on, believe me."

Jesus didn't meet Judas's gaze. "It's wrong to do it in the Temple," he murmured.

Judas guffawed. "In God's house, you mean? My little trick won't bother him. Look at what he's already allowing. Ten times worse than anything I could dream up."

"Still."

"You found a convenient moment to be pious, didn't you?" Judas turned, mocking, raising his hands in imitation of a village rabbi on Shabbat. "Hear me, God. I'll do anything to save your people, except risk my hide. There are limits, don't you know?" He took the small chunk of the bread Jesus had given him and threw it into the street.

Jesus jumped to his feet. "I'm going."

"We both are," Judas replied, his voice cold and hard. "The holy city hasn't revealed all its charms yet." He collared Jesus and began to drag him away. "Don't fight me," said Judas grimly as Jesus struggled to pull out of his grip. "I'm going to show you what you really are, a hypocrite. The same as the rest of them."

When he felt Jesus relent, Judas let him go. They walked together down a narrow street feeding into the Temple grounds. Both were angry, but Judas knew that his younger companion doubted himself. He'd have to use that doubt to conquer Jesus's fear.

"Look over there," he said, halting halfway down the street. He nodded toward a stall where a petty merchant sold head cloths and cheap relics. "You see his three daughters behind him? They're not his daughters. They're holy women. That's what they're called."

Without looking to see if Jesus followed, Judas walked up to the stall. He greeted the seller of relics, a burly man who stood with his arms crossed over his chest. He asked him what was on offer.

"Whatever you please. The goods aren't hiding. Take a look."

The seller gave a curt nod. Behind him three veiled women who were crouching in the shadows stood up. They looked like ordinary women except for the gold ankle bracelets revealed by skirts an inch too short. One after another, each parted her veil, giving Judas a flashing peek at her face. Their skin was pale; kohl had been applied heavily around the eyes to make them seductively black against the paleness.

"Age?" Judas asked.

"The youngest is twelve, the middle one fifteen, and the oldest sixteen." The seller, making no disguise of his real profession, gave an oily smile.

“Liar. The oldest one barely showed herself for two seconds. She’s twenty if she’s a day,” Judas said. “A hag.” He glanced over his shoulder. Jesus was hanging back several yards, averting his eyes.

The procurer winked. “Your friend is shy. Tell him there’s nothing to worry about. All my holy women are pure. The twelve-year-old is a virgin.”

Judas had heard enough. “Maybe later. Tell your virgin to go to the priests to be worshiped. If she’s a virgin, it must be a miracle.”

The procurer didn’t take offense. He laughed as one man of the world would with another. With a wave of his hand the three women sank silently back down into the shadows.

When he returned to where Jesus was standing, Judas looked satisfied. “Good, you’re shocked. Now let’s get on with it.”

Judas was canny enough to leave his companion to his own thoughts. Jesus would soon realize on his own that he couldn’t do without Judas. The Zealots would seek revenge if he disavowed them, and if he retreated into his usual dream world—for Judas had little doubt that there was a streak of religious delusion at work here—Jesus couldn’t deny the danger he’d brought to his family.

At this point, it was only necessary to put Jesus’s trust to a small test. When they got to the Temple gates, Judas handed Jesus the cage of doves. “Go inside. Make the sacrifice you promised. I’ll meet you in the judgment hall in an hour.” Without another word Judas turned on his heels and walked away, disappearing into the crowds that were swelling as the day grew on.

Jesus watched him go and wished that he could run in the opposite direction. But Judas’s assumptions were right. Jesus had been sunk in doubts all morning. He realized that he was powerless; without Judas he had no protection. Cradling the cage of doves in his arm, he joined the stream of devotees

making their way across the vast sun-bleached courtyard to make their offerings before the sanctuary. This was a smaller building at the back of the Temple grounds, each stone hewn as the scriptures demanded, without the use of iron tools. Stone could only be hacked with stone. Faced with such slow and painful labor, the ancient builders could be excused for leaving the blocks rough-sided, but they were doing holy work and the walls of the sanctuary were smooth enough to gleam in the light.

By contrast the inner chamber was rough and as smothering as a cave. Jesus stopped for a moment and let the crowd jostle past him. None could trespass into the priests' area, but all had been told of what the sacred place held. The Ark of the Covenant was lost, but the descendants of Abraham and Moses had done everything they could to recreate the First Temple. The high altar, the flickering menorah, the showbread sacrifices were all placed before God.

Once, when he was twelve, Jesus had been so entranced by these sights that he couldn't bear to leave them. His family was staying at an inn over Passover. It was time to leave, but Jesus had slipped away saying that he wanted to catch a ride in one of the wagons at the end of the long train that had come from Nazareth. When no one was looking, he ran back to the Temple, which was by that time deserted. He had the place all to himself until two old priests tried to shoo him out. To linger longer, the boy began to ask questions. If God gave Moses the tablets to last forever, how could he allow the Gentiles to steal them? Why did the Persian king give a thousand workers to rebuild the Temple—did God come to him in a vision?

His first questions were childish, but after a while Jesus began to trust the old priests, who were flattered at having their knowledge tested. He opened up about the dilemmas that had been bothering him a long time. If a Jewish baby was stolen or abandoned, like Moses floating in a woven basket down the Nile, would God still know that it was Jewish, no matter where it was taken? If a man was so poor that he

couldn't afford to travel to the Temple to make sacrifice, could he atone in his heart instead and earn God's forgiveness?

The priests were taken aback and asked the boy how such complicated questions came into his head. Because he knew people whose children were stolen, Jesus said. And others so poor that they couldn't afford so much as a handful of barley flour for the altar. The priests were touched and grew expansive. One discussion led to another; the strangely wise boy was allowed to eat with them and sleep on a pallet beside them. By the time Joseph retraced the road and returned to the Temple, panicked and angry, Jesus hardly realized that three days had passed.

Reaching inside the cage, Jesus pulled out a dove, the whitest one of four. It went completely still in his hands, trembling with fear. Jesus joined the line of worshipers waiting to approach near the sanctuary. As they inched forward, he saw a priest come out, a huge man wearing a thick leather apron over his robes. A bloody knife stuck out of his belt.

The priest shouted at a man in front of the door who was tugging at a calf; the animal was so terrified that it was bawling and struggling to slip out of the noose around its neck.

"Move it in or get out!" the priest shouted. The smell of blood that he gave off made the calf more terrified. Impatiently the priest drew his knife and swiped it across the calf's throat. The cut was just deep enough to nick an artery without slicing through it. Blood began running down the calf's chest; it staggered, barely able to stand.

"There," the priest said, holding out one hand. The calf's owner groped for some coins to put in it; with his other hand the priest held the calf, ready to drag it inside. It had quit bawling and was easy to subdue. The other worshipers farther back in line stopped grumbling about the delay.

The smell of blood reached as far back in line as where Jesus stood. It was an old, remembered smell. He had seen the altar before, with animal innards burning amid acrid smoke and choice bits of meat sliced off the carcass to be set aside for

the priests. Sacrifice had never sickened him before. Now he stepped out of line and held the dove high over his head.

He let go of the dove, but instead of flying upward, it fluttered to the ground. Fear had weakened the creature so much it couldn't fly. The sight made several men laugh—some hick had been fooled into buying a sick bird not fit for sacrifice. Jesus knelt down and lifted the dove again, but he didn't throw it into the air. The dove had quit moving or even trembling and died in his hands.

No one took any notice this time. Something else had caught everyone's attention. An old woman was trying to push her way in line. She was small and wizened. Her hands fumbled with some flowers she had picked along the way, and her shawl had fallen down around her shoulders. Apparently she didn't notice that her head was uncovered. Some men began pushing to get her out of the way; others called her an old whore, expressing their outrage at this defilement of the Temple.

“Let me help you, mother. Are those flowers your offering?”

The old woman squinted up at Jesus. For a moment he was afraid that she might be out of her wits and would scream at him. Women weren't allowed in line, and flowers weren't acceptable offerings. But her agitation, which had been increasing, suddenly calmed. She blinked like an owl caught in daylight and muttered, “Draw near me, I will run after thee. The king hath brought me into his chambers.”

“What?” said Jesus, taken aback.

“Don't they teach you anything?” The old woman shook her head haughtily. She shut her eyes, as if drawing words from a deep well of memory. “We will be glad and rejoice in thee; we will remember thy love more than wine.” She smiled to herself. “Could anything be more beautiful?”

The line was moving forward again, trying to shove both of them aside. “If you dragged that crone out of her cave, take

her back,” one man jeered.

“Here, mother, come with me.” Jesus gently pulled the old woman by the sleeve while covering her head with her shawl. She was paying no attention to the disturbance around her. One bony hand clutched her flowers tightly, and yet she didn’t totter. When the other hand reached out to hold on to Jesus, her grip was firm. They made their way to a stone bench by the cisterns where all the women went to purify themselves before worship.

“The Song of Songs,” she said. The old woman tilted her head quizzically. “That’s what I was quoting. Didn’t you recognize it?” Jesus shook his head, and she sighed. “They tore down Solomon’s Temple, but they can’t kill his words.” She gave a knowing tap to her forehead. “Now you know my secret. Don’t tell anybody.”

Jesus smiled. Even if she was half cracked, the old woman made him forget the trouble he was being pulled into. “And what secret is that?” he asked.

She bent toward him and whispered, “I’m a sinner. I can read. They’d tear me apart if they knew.”

Jesus couldn’t hide his surprise. “Who taught you?”

“My father. He was rich, but he had no sons. It sent him into such despair that he brought tutors to our house at night. I learned to read by candlelight, like a conspirator in a cave.”

This last part was accompanied by a sharp look, much sharper than anything an addled crone would deliver. Before Jesus could react, she said, “God doesn’t need help picking out the wicked.”

“Because there are so many?” asked Jesus.

She shook her head. “Because the covenant isn’t in there.” She nodded toward the huge oak doors of the sanctuary. “God knows the righteous by reading their hearts. Out of the whole world he picked Noah, didn’t he? Out of riotous Sodom he picked Lot. The righteous shine by their own light. He’ll pick someone else soon.”

Jesus looked down at the old woman's hands, which were at work plaiting together her flowers, mostly small pink roses of the kind that grew wild in ditches around the city.

"Is it enough to be righteous?" he asked quietly.

"It has to be. The wicked will always win by numbers, won't they? No matter how many lambs are born in the spring, there will always be more wolves to eat them."

The old woman, musing to herself, remembered another line of scripture. "I am the rose of Sharon, and the lily of the valleys. As the lily among brambles, so is my love among the daughters of Zion."

She had finished her circlet of roses, and without warning she placed it on Jesus's head. It was too small and tilted at an angle. She giggled, and as often happens with old people, her giggle made her sound like a child again. "How pretty that looks on you. Like a crown."

WHEN THE TWENTY-THREE judges filed into the hall, Judas bowed with the rest of the petitioners. The members of the Sanhedrin were men of stature, all the more so because of their tall black headdresses and the gold clasps that held their robes closed. Authority didn't enrage Judas the way it did the Zealots. What made a man a judge over other men? Not God, of that Judas was certain.

As a boy in Jerusalem, he knew his father's friend Simeon, who lacked the cunning to make money. Everyone pitied him and his wife, who lost two babies because her milk was too thin to nurse them. People whispered behind her back of a curse, but Judas's father took his son aside and explained reality to him.

"She's half starved and probably poisoned. Simeon creeps off when no one is looking and buys rancid flour with weevils in it and God knows what else. Ground bones, marble dust. They can't afford anything else."

As Simeon's plight grew worse, he started to love the Torah more. He became obsessed with figuring out what God wanted, because it must have been God's will that separated a wretch like Simeon from a rich neighbor like Judas's father. In the third book of Torah, Leviticus, more than six hundred laws were handed down to guide a righteous life. Simeon went half blind studying them every waking hour—Judas could smell the tallow from candles burning next door after midnight.

Even though Judas was a boy and Simeon a man, he pitied him. God's laws were a tangled mare's nest; only a fool would be so deluded that he'd attempt to unravel them. Then, by some miracle, the same Simeon who "accidentally" dropped by their house when soup was on the table gained a reputation for wisdom. Poor people who couldn't afford to consult a priest came to his house. He parsed the law for them and settled the most baffling queries. If a Jew buys a horse without knowing that a Roman once owned it, is the horse defiled? If a Jew eats pork that has been maliciously put into his food without his knowledge, how great is the sin?

After a time, the meager offerings enabled Simeon's wife to nurse her next baby in good health. One day she appeared in a new head covering without holes in it. The neighbors couldn't believe this change of fortune, but Jews worship learning even more than God (so his father told him), all the more if they have no learning themselves.

Now there he was, Simeon the judge marching into the hall with the rest of the Sanhedrin. He had become someone Judas must bow to. Judas imagined, as Simeon took his seat, that their eyes met for an instant over the throng. Did he sense the truth, that he was the one Judas had chosen to poison with the thorn?

"I'm here."

Judas had been so absorbed that he didn't see Jesus by his side. He had the cage of doves in his hands. "Are you ready to play your part?" he asked.

"God willing," Jesus replied.

It wasn't the right answer, but it would have to do. The first plaintiffs were approaching the long judges' table, gesticulating in the air as they wailed their complaints. Judas pulled Jesus by the arm and shoved through the crowd, crying out for justice as he waved the caged birds over his head.

"Help me, sirs. I've been cheated! My sacrifice is defiled!"

Judas wailed like a peasant, bowing obsequiously to the judges, who were still yards away. The packed throng didn't want to let him through, but Judas was louder and more persistent than anyone else. He rolled his eyes alarmingly; foam gathered at the corners of his mouth.

"See, see?" he cried. "They sold me filthy birds, full of disease. My child is covered with sores just from touching them!"

People shrank back in horror. The Temple guards were too far away to reach Judas in time. He drew within earshot of the judges. They were indifferent, however. With bored faces they nibbled at dried figs and olives while waving their hands over petty cases decided by the hundreds every day.

Lagging behind, Jesus saw that Judas's prediction of events had been astute. He forced himself so close that the judges had to notice him. Judas furtively plucked the poisoned thorn from his robe and pricked Simeon's neck. The judge, who was whispering to a colleague and doing his best not to notice the rank odor of the crowd, barely felt the prick. But the guard stationed behind him saw Judas's quick motion.

"Hey!" he cried, making a lunge over Simeon's shoulder to grab Judas's collar. At a signal, other guards rushed the table. Judas allowed himself to be taken, shoving Jesus back so that he might escape notice. He loudly cursed as he was being dragged away.

"Hypocrites! God would never do this to an innocent man!"

Simeon shrugged and tossed a bowl of olives on the floor—stale. The milling bystanders were jostled; a few laughed,

most pushed harder to fill in the gap left when Judas lost his place.

Judas waited until he could see Simeon's neck swell, the flesh turning a livid purplish red. He cried, "I will exact vengeance, O Israel!"

Judas's timing was perfect. Simeon's tongue lolled out. He made a strangled sound, like someone crying out as a garotte squeezed his throat, and fell to the floor, seizing violently. The crowd was stunned.

But then calamity. Another man, his face cowled in a black hood, pressed forward. Before anyone could grab him, he bent over the fallen judge. For half a moment he could have been mistaken for a mysterious healer sent out of nowhere, until someone screamed, "A knife!"

The cowled figure held the blade in midair so that it could make its full effect, then he plunged it into Simeon's chest. A fountain of blood gushed upward, drenching the assassin's robe. He slipped in blood as he stood up, almost losing his balance, yet everything had happened so fast that no one seized him. The killer shouted a few incomprehensible words (later a scribe claimed that it was a prophecy from Isaiah, "He will smite the nations and slay the wicked").

At last a spectator was able to pull back the assassin's cowl, and what it revealed made Judas go white.

"It's them," he cried. "Run!"

Judas didn't glance at Jesus, but if he had, he would have seen a face as pale as his own. They both recognized one of the young Zealots from the cave. The rebels hadn't trusted Judas after all, sending a spy to watch him and to complete his mission if he failed.

Because Judas's sham miracle had come so close to the stabbing, the crowd pounced on him. Cries of "traitor" and "blasphemer" arose. But Judas had realized the danger so fast that he and Jesus were almost at the doors before they were seized. Judas threw off the two old men who jumped him.

“Go, go!” he screamed.

Another man, much stronger than the two old ones, had grabbed Jesus, who only escaped by slipping out of his cloak.

They were lucky enough to run out the doors that faced the street rather than the inner courtyard. A mob of Jews would have trapped them on the Temple grounds. Judas paused to rip off telltale marks—amulets, headband, earrings, Temple cap—that would give them away. Jesus hesitated to do the same.

“What is it? Don’t be a fool,” Judas shouted. He grabbed the thin chain around Jesus’s neck. It broke, and a silver mezuzah fell to the ground. Jesus bent to pick it up, but Judas screamed that there was no time and pulled him away.

They had wasted precious seconds. A pack of Temple guards had tumbled into the street. They spotted the fugitives and began to shout for the crowd to stop them. But nobody obeyed; some lounging Roman soldiers began laughing and baying like hounds chasing a deer.

Judas dragged Jesus into a narrow alley crammed with vendors’ carts, which would slow down their pursuers, but he hadn’t counted on the gate at the end of the alley being locked. Judas struggled desperately with the rusty iron latch.

He ordered Jesus to help. Instead of pounding on the gate or shouting for help, however, Jesus stood aside without a word.

“What’s your idea? That God wants us to get killed?” Judas accused him angrily.

At that moment a nearby door opened, and a woman appeared. It would seem impossible that she’d do anything but scream and run back inside. The Temple soldiers were at the mouth of the alley, pointing at the fugitives and screaming obscenities at the fruit vendors who wouldn’t get out of their way.

The woman took all of this in. Instead of retreating, she pointed inside her house. What choice did they have? Judas

and Jesus took refuge; she slammed the door behind them and bolted it.

“It will take them a couple of minutes to break in,” she said. Her voice was remarkably composed. “I think we can make it.”

We? There was no time to question her. Judas nodded, and the woman quickly led them through a series of rooms leading to an outer passage. It was dark and almost too narrow for a grown man to squeeze through. After a few yards the passage turned a corner, and they were thrown into total darkness. A smuggler’s route, Judas surmised.

Whether that or something else, the passage was devious. Just before it broke out into the street—they could already spy sunlight at the far end—a hidden door disguised to look like part of the plastered wall opened off to the left. The woman pushed, and the door swung open on creaky hinges.

They made it through just in time, crowding into a cramped, suffocating closet. Judas’s nerves tingled; he heard the clumping boots of the guards running past them down the passageway, the iron nails on their soles clanging against the stone floor before they faded away and he heard nothing.

“Just a few seconds more,” the woman whispered. “Sometimes they’re cunning.”

Sure enough, a second set of boots ran past the door. Their pursuers had split up in case they met with a ruse. After a minute these faded too, and there was silence again. Cautiously the woman opened the door, peering both ways.

Jesus grabbed her hands to mumble his thanks, but she pulled away. “I don’t need thanks. I need to come with you.”

“Why?” he asked.

Yet Judas already knew, because he hadn’t averted his eyes when the “holy women” unveiled their faces that morning. This one was the oldest of the prostitutes, the one whose procurer claimed was sixteen but was obviously older.

“All right, you can come,” Judas agreed. Once they were safe, he could find out why she had decided to trust them. That a prostitute would want to run away from her procurer was obvious. Anyway, she knew the dizzy, winding warren of the Jerusalem slums better than any Temple guard would have.

The nameless “holy woman” didn’t move immediately. She looked steadily at Jesus. “And you?” she asked. “Can you stand it, traveling with a whore?”

He gave a nod, which was enough. She led them back the way they had come, then out through the dead-end alley. She produced a key for the locked gate, and two minutes later they were a long way from the Temple grounds.

Judas’s nerves stopped tingling, and the buzz of excitement died in his ears. The three of them were walking slowly in a straight line down a dark lane lined with animal pens. Goats and sheep milled together listlessly, ignoring them as they passed. Judas looked back at Jesus, who was last in line. He had said nothing along the way and had acted indifferent to the whore after he realized who she was. Judas was a little mystified, wondering if this was the passivity of a perfect follower or the inscrutability of a potential betrayer.

Jesus wasn’t being enigmatic. He kept seeing the silver capsule of the mezuzah Judas had ripped from his neck. He had been desolate at its loss. The Book demanded as a *mitzvah*, a commandment, that every righteous household have a mezuzah nailed to the doorpost at the threshold. But a new custom had arisen among the workers who traveled the roads. They wanted to carry Yahweh’s protection with them wherever they went. Now Jesus had thrown it away.

Judas would have scorned this superstition, and Jesus never mentioned it afterward. Who deserved God’s protection? A judge was lying in a pool of his own blood. The Zealots knew that they had two renegades in their midst and would hunt them down. For some reason, none of this threatened Jesus. It was as if he could see inside the mezuzah where a tiny prayer was inscribed on a scrap of parchment. Trailing

after the “holy woman” in the dust of the street, he repeated the opening words to himself: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is One.”

There was no other comfort to be had.

6

WILDERNESS AND WORSHIP

The three fugitives decided to run toward the Dead Sea. At first Judas refused to head south. He painted a grim picture of barren shores and sun-parched villages. “What do you expect to live on, salt? The farmers pray to avoid famine every year.”

Besides, he argued, the Romans were in firm control of the area. They recruited spies from the desperately poor. “There’s no rebel underground there. Nobody’s going to hide us. If we go north where we came from, we’ll find sympathizers.”

“And Zealots who want to kill us,” Jesus reminded him.

“They don’t know anything yet,” said Judas. “Maybe their assassin didn’t make it back. He could be rotting in Pilate’s dungeons for all we know.”

The three runaways were sitting around a low campfire in a gully full of brush that couldn’t be seen from the main road. Jerusalem was now a day’s walk behind them, and God had been kind. None of the Roman patrols gave the three nameless travelers a second glance.

The holy woman had disclosed that her name was Mary, the same as Jesus’s mother. So far she had taken no part in the argument. A woman wouldn’t expect to. Instead, she had gathered twigs for the fire, brewed a bitter tea from wild herbs in a pot she found discarded by the side of the road, and listened silently.

Suddenly Mary spoke up. “Galilee is too dangerous. Informants will be thicker where there’s rebellion. The fewer inhabitants, the better.” The two men stared at her, but instead of shrinking back, Mary lifted her head. “I’m not invisible, and

I have a brain,” she said. “Remember who got you out of the city.”

Judas flared up. “You say you have a brain. How much of a brain did it take to be a whore?”

“Enough to earn this.” Mary patted her robe, and the sound of jingling coins could be heard.

Judas jumped to his feet. “You have money? Why are we starving out here like animals? We can find an inn. Give it here.”

Mary refused. “I’m saving it for a desperate moment. When we have to pay for our lives. Which do you prefer, a night in a good bed or getting out of jail?”

Judas retreated into sullen silence. They all knew she was right. One day, perhaps very soon, a corrupt jailer might need to be paid off. The point was to postpone that moment as long as possible.

They slept in the gully that night, maintaining their small fire screened by underbrush. Since Mary had found a spot far away from the two men, Judas argued to Jesus again for heading north to Galilee. Jesus wouldn’t listen. Since Mary had money and served them by taking on most of the work, the group shouldn’t split up, however disgruntled Judas acted.

“All right, have it your way,” said Judas. “Guard the camp. I’ll sleep.”

It was easier to comply than to keep arguing. Doing without a lookout was too dangerous. The terrain encircling the Dead Sea was mostly wilderness, which held a natural attraction for anyone who needed to hide: robbers, escapees from Roman jails, tax evaders, and the like.

They continued their course to the southeast for several days.

Every night brought the necessity of finding a place to bed down. Two men and a single woman walking into a village aroused immediate suspicion. Mary went to market to buy

their food. She knew how to be frugal. Three people could be sustained for a shekel on fish scraps and day-old bread. Scowling vendors shoved the goods at her, then shooed her away so as not to taint their stalls. They didn't know Mary's profession, but her brazen haggling, the seductive traces of black kohl around her eyes, and her direct gaze gave something away.

"Let them stare," she said. "Last week it was my business to attract stares."

Mary had desperately wanted to escape Jerusalem and degradation. But she wasn't the same country girl who first came there. Her hands were smooth from unguents and aloe cream. She wore toe rings and a tiny gold hoop in one ear. It had been necessary to advertise. You never knew when a casual glance from a man on the streets might lead to a seduction. Because she was tall but fair-skinned, almost milky, passing glances were common, and Mary had to steel herself from the contempt of other women and the leers of men.

"All the other merchants sell their goods," she said. "In my trade, I am the goods."

Before Jesus agreed to travel with her beyond the walls of Jerusalem, he made Mary promise that she wouldn't offer herself anymore. Judas grumbled that just walking by her side was a sin. If they were living by the Book, the two men shouldn't even eat the same food as she did or let her cook their meals.

Mary laughed. "You'd rather go hungry than break the law? Look around. Not many Pharisees are wandering the roads to catch you."

She kept up a brave front, but Mary was worried about being abandoned by the two men. One night when they were alone, she confided to Jesus. "Judas can't decide whether to treat me like a woman or a leper. At least if I were a leper, he wouldn't be so tempted to touch me."

Seeing the shocked look on Jesus's face, she softly said, "You're the only one I can put some hope in. You can tell the difference between the sinner and the sin."

Jesus protested. "I've joined with Judas. We're only strong together."

Mary gave him a knowing smile. "Don't be tough. It doesn't come naturally to you."

Without warning she took his hand and held it tight enough so that Jesus couldn't draw back. "What makes this different from your mother's hand or your sister's? A touch is a touch, until somebody makes you afraid by naming it a sin."

Jesus was thoroughly embarrassed by now, and Mary let go. "See? You didn't lash out at me. That means you're in doubt."

"What's good about that?"

She stood up. "There's more to life than the Book. You're young. You'll find out soon enough." It was a condescending thing to say, and she walked away to wash her face in a nearby stream without explaining herself. But that night Jesus awoke under the stars with a start. Mary was crouched beside him, touching his arm.

"Here," she whispered. She thrust her money bag into Jesus's hands. "Keep it safe, and give it back when I ask for it. Don't tell him."

"Why do you trust me?" Jesus asked.

"I'm not sure. Maybe I'm trapped with two thieves." She left Jesus to work things out on his own.

A few days later, Jesus confronted Mary. "You were forced into being with men. You're not really a..."

Mary shook her head. "No. Things happened."

Her story was violent and short. When Mary was of age she was betrothed to a young apprentice in the gold trade. He was absorbed in his work, bent over a table for hours making

intricate braided necklaces and religious ornaments. One day, just before their marriage was to take place, the Romans burst into the shop and accused the gold workers of counterfeiting imperial coins. The owners of the shop had two choices. Turn over the guilty party or have every worker carted off to prison. Jonas, her betrothed, the youngest of the apprentices, was sacrificed.

“He didn’t go away bravely,” said Mary. “He went away in tears. The way you might have.”

She said this almost as if it were something to admire.

With Jonas condemned as a traitor, Mary became too dangerous for anyone to be seen with. She ran away to Jerusalem one night, leaving behind her dowry, so that her younger sister would have a chance to marry.

“I was alone, but it wasn’t long before a panderer spotted me and kidnapped me off the streets. He beat me for a while, then put me to work. Nobody whores who isn’t a slave. That was six months ago. I’ve watched and waited to make my escape.” Mary looked at Jesus curiously. “How did you figure it out?”

“I looked past what you wanted me to see.”

Mary was lost for a reply.

“What are you two gabbing about?” Judas said irritably, just returning from scavenging the terrain. Fish scraps and moldy bread turned his stomach after a few days. But he had managed to find a dripping honeycomb that came with the price of the stings all over his face. They were already starting to swell. In his sleeve he had wrapped some withered crab apples. Judas crouched on the ground and divided his find.

“We were talking about you,” said Mary, meeting Judas’s annoyed glance. “You’ve been wanting to abandon me, but you haven’t found the right moment to break it to the boy.”

Before Jesus could protest, she said to him, “Don’t you know that he thinks of you that way? As his boy?”

“Enough!” Judas shouted. He had long, brawny arms, and without moving from the spot where he was crouching, he reached out, slapping the woman hard enough to knock her over. Mary cried out and lay still, not moving.

Jesus bent down and picked up her portion of the honeycomb, which had fallen in the dust. He tried to clean off its sticky surface with his fingers. “Here,” he said quietly, handing it back to her. “I’m not worth starving over.”

He turned to Judas, still speaking mildly. “Remind me, what makes you more respectable than she is? You scheme in caves with criminals. You got an innocent man killed in a holy place. Maybe you’re the one who should be ashamed before God.”

Judas stiffened. “You have no right. I do it all for God.”

“So you get to name what is your sin and what isn’t?” Jesus didn’t wait for a reply. “If you have that right, so does she.”

Judas snorted with contempt. “A whore without sin? Thank you, rabbi, for the lesson.”

They ate in silence, and soon it was time to move again. Bushwhacking seemed safer than chancing the roads and bandits. They began hacking their way through thorny underbrush, following the course of a rocky streambed starved for water.

When Judas pulled out of earshot, Jesus said. “He won’t bother you from now on.”

“Why? He didn’t believe you back there,” said Mary. “You can see how his mind works. If I’m guilty, that lessens his sin.”

“He’s afraid of me now,” said Jesus.

Mary looked skeptical. “I’ve never seen a lamb drive away a wolf. I’ve been carrying rocks under my shift in case I have to defend you.”

Jesus smiled confidently. “I know him now. He’s the kind who finds it unbearable not to be followed. My threat is that I can walk away.”

There was a long way to go before they had any hope of a friendly roof over their heads. All three of them were hiding their faces from God. For the moment there was nothing to separate them from murderers, Samaritans, and the desperate of the earth.

SOON THEY GAVE up bushwhacking for narrow side roads. At camp Judas still handed out orders as if he were commanding a band of fifty rebels instead of two exhausted wanderers. At nightfall he would hand Jesus his knife to cut down pine boughs for their makeshift bedding. When Jesus came back with an armload, Judas critically examined every branch, throwing half of them away with disgust. Likewise, he’d spit out water that Mary brought to him, complaining it was too foul to drink. Most of the time Judas was too distracted to notice either of them. He ate his food staring at the ground and answered direct questions with only a “hmm,” after which he got up and walked away.

Behind his back Mary laughed at him. “You know what he’s doing, don’t you? He’s making big plans. In his mind you and I are stepping-stones to his greatness.” She thought Judas was delusional.

Jesus was past looking for omens, yet one crossed his path. It happened on the fourth day away from Jerusalem. As they were traveling along a deep ravine, he looked up. Overhead was a large rock that looked like the profile of an old man. Jesus shook his head, but not because the rock was so curiously real in the way it depicted the old man’s nose and beard. He had seen the same outcropping two days before—they had wandered in a circle.

“Look,” he said. “The Moses rock.”

Mary's eyes followed where he was pointing. "Is that what you call it?" She frowned and her voice rose. "I've seen that rock before."

Judas, who as always had taken the lead on the trail, looked over his shoulder. He'd become used to the way Jesus and Mary talked together in low voices. Mary shot him an accusing glance, but Jesus pressed her shoulder, and she kept quiet. She had lost all trust in Judas, and she was impatient, simply biding her time.

"We'll leave whenever you decide to," she said in a fierce whisper. "But don't wait so long that you find me gone."

As a Jew, Jesus knew that God's plans were a secret (like Judas's, he thought with a smile), and when his people wandered in the desert for forty years, what saved them? Scripture said that manna was given to sustain them, but Jesus realized that the lost ones weren't living on bread, even divine bread. They lived on the vision of Moses. What looked aimless to the outward eye he knew was part of a hidden design. The chosen people weren't lost in a desert; they were lost in a puzzle. Only to the worthy did God reveal the key to the puzzle. Which meant that Judas wasn't delusional at all. He was trying to figure out God's hidden purpose. Would he be able to? Jesus had no way of knowing, but when he saw the curious rock a second time, it hit him. God would allow them to be lost until they stopped being blind. That was their test.

No one discussed the reality that they were walking in circles. All three of them just quietly walked the entire day. The next day was Friday and their first Shabbat on the road. The still waters of the Dead Sea looked like lead under a sullen sky. As daylight dimmed, they sat down by the side of the road. The law forbade them to travel after sunset. All at once a wind came from the north, a howling, vindictive wind that drove them to seek shelter.

"Come on!" Judas shouted. Pelting rain had soaked them through after barely a minute. He pointed to the dim outline of

a small structure in the distance. They wound up huddling in a farmer's lean-to as darkness descended.

Mary produced the last of the food. She also brought out a candle. "You decide about this," she said, turning to Jesus.

Shabbat always began with the woman of the house, mother or daughter, lighting two candles, or one if the family was very poor. Jesus hesitated for a moment, then he nodded. Mary set the candle upright on the ground. She didn't wait for Judas's rebuke. "Turn away if you have to. We are commanded," she said.

Mary struck the flint that she had brought with her from home. But the wind was seeping through cracks in the shed, making it hard to strike a flame. For several minutes Judas watched her efforts with undisguised disdain. "Let me," he growled, but when he reached out for the flint, Jesus pulled his hand back.

"Tell me first. Why do we do this?" he said.

Judas was irritated. "Let's just get on with it, rabbi. We're miserable, but at least we can pray."

Jesus shook his head. "Why?"

"Why what? Why a candle, why Shabbat? You're being ridiculous. This is what our people do."

"Shabbat was supposed to remind our people that we are holy."

Judas was about to throw Jesus's holiness back at him when a strong gust suddenly blew open the rickety door of the shed. It thwacked Judas in the back and dashed cold rain on his already soaked robes. This only infuriated Judas further.

"Stop preaching at me!" he shouted. He kicked the candle out of Mary's hands and slammed the door shut again. "We're not inside the law anymore. You and this"—he didn't dare to say *whore* again—"you're living in a dream. Wake up, and do it quick, or we're all going to wind up dead."

“It’s not given to know the hour of our death,” Jesus said. “Shabbat is our true life. We stop everything to remember that we will never be outside the covenant.” He said this hesitantly. It troubled him to remind Judas of the most basic things.

Judas’s voice took on an edge of hysteria. “One good swipe from a Roman sword, and your head will be outside the covenant. How many candles are going to save you, rabbi?”

“God is going to save us,” Jesus said firmly.

“Why, because no one else cares spit about us? Let me tell you, they don’t.”

“Because I’m going to give him a reason to, starting now.”

Without backing down, Judas let it go. He watched glumly as Jesus crawled on his hands and knees, scrabbling in the dark to find the lost candle. When he did, Mary wiped off the dirty wick and went back to striking her flint. A spark caught fire, and a moment later she was praying. *Blessed are you, Lord, our God, ruler of the universe, who has sanctified us with his commandments and commanded us to light the lights of Shabbat. Amen.*

Out of caution she mumbled the words to herself. Jesus knelt beside her. He expected to hear Judas storm out, but when he opened his eyes, Judas was slumped in the corner, his head between his hands.

“*Ruach Adonai*,” Jesus murmured, invoking the breath of God that sustains a devout Jew every day. If Judas heard the blessing, he didn’t raise his head to receive it. More likely the words were drowned out by the wind that wanted to break in.

Morning began with the sound of wailing women. Their high keening woke Jesus and Judas with a start. Aching from the damp ground and distracted by their soaked robes, they looked around in confusion. Mary was gone. The wailing was clearly emanating from more than one woman.

Mary stepped back inside the dwelling and beckoned with her hand. “There’s trouble. You’d better come and see.”

Following her, the men saw a large farmer's wagon that had pulled off the road a hundred yards away. A family was on the move; they had ridden out the storm huddled under the wagon. The donkey that pulled it must have panicked during the night, because it had slipped its traces and broken loose.

"What can we do?" Mary asked.

The women were wailing for the beast to come back, but it was barely in sight now, searching out meager grazing as it loped along.

"Nothing," said Judas. "It's their misfortune."

He spoke according to the law. If a Gentile happened to be there, he could hitch the donkey up again without sin. But because they were forbidden to do any work on Shabbat, the two men of the family, who appeared to be father and son, could only stand by and watch.

"I'll go," said Jesus. Mary tried to hold him back, but he was already running across the field. The donkey was old and placid. It let the stranger approach and take the loose bridle. A moment later Jesus led it back.

"It's all right," he said to Mary. He turned to Judas. "I'm listening to your guidance. Didn't you say we were outside the law?"

But the farmer's family took the animal back reluctantly, and one could see that the father was almost angry.

Jesus pointed to a kid goat tethered to the back of the wagon. "Give that one to me. I'll make sacrifice in the next town." The farmer hesitated, exchanging glances with his wife. "And then you'll have the meat to eat," Jesus added. "I promise."

Instead of calming the farmer's suspicions, this seemed to amplify them.

"Your head," the farmer's wife broke the tense silence, pointing at Jesus.

Jesus felt his forehead with his fingers. There was a large welt near the hairline. It hurt to the touch, but he couldn't remember being wounded. "It's nothing," he said.

"I will take care of it. My blessing will atone for your sin," the farmer's wife insisted. Mary and Judas knew that they couldn't cause a commotion and so eventually Jesus was lying in the back of the wagon as the farmer's family set off again. The wife rubbed a poultice on his forehead. It stank, and when she bound his head with a scrap of linen, the pain made Jesus wince.

"Sorry," she murmured and loosened the bandage.

Without asking permission to join the farmer's party, Judas and Mary trailed behind the wagon on foot. They kept a respectful distance, which didn't prevent the father and son from throwing a warning glare at them every few minutes.

Jesus sat up and was surprised to find the world beginning to swim. A veil of black specks, like a swarm of gnats in summer, fell across his eyes. He realized that he was fainting too late to stop it. The swarming specks grew thicker, and he suddenly remembered how he had been hurt. The kind woman at the Temple and the prickly crown of roses she put on him. It had made the tiniest scratch, the last thing that should have caused harm. For a fleeting second he saw the bright pink flowers and heard her giggle—the rest was blackness.

PART TWO

MIRACLE WORKER

7

CATCH AND RELEASE

Jesus awoke to find hands reaching for him. They clutched at his robes, jerking him upright as if they were hoisting a sack of millet. Rain was beating down on his face and angry voices were arguing. Was this part of his fever dream? Jesus tried to ignore the shooting pain in his head.

“You can’t just throw him out. Look at him.”

“I don’t care. He’s nothing to us. Come on, boy, pull!”

The farmer and his son almost had the body out of the wagon now. Jesus’s sagging weight made the work clumsy. Their sandals kept slipping on the wet floor of the wagon.

Jesus was too weak to protest. His head flopped to one side like a rag doll’s. Judas was standing beside the farmer’s wagon in the road, his face livid.

“The sin will be on your heads. Is that what you want?” Judas shouted.

“We’re done carrying him. He’s all yours now.” The father’s voice was hard and stubborn. Jesus moaned as his backbone scraped along the wagon’s splintered floorboards. He had been surrounded by the fog of pain for so long that it didn’t matter anymore. What Jesus feared was blacking out again and descending into a void worse than any physical torment. In this gaping darkness, he saw sharp-fanged demons gnawing at his heart and dragging him further into the darkness.

The wound on his forehead stank; his flesh was suppurating. He could faintly remember Mary peeling away the bandage. A greenish ooze rolled down his forehead, and

Mary turned away so that Jesus would not see her weep. The rain felt cool, and he wasn't shivering despite being exposed to the weather. It was almost pleasant to be thrown away. The pain would end. He wouldn't have to dwell on how he had failed his God.

“Wait. I said wait, dammit! We can pay.”

Jesus was barely conscious enough to hear the words. This time it was a woman's voice, Mary's. He felt fingers fumbling at his waist. There was a jingle of coins, and then the rough hands lowered him to the ground.

“This ain't much.”

“It's what you're getting. Who are the Gentiles to rob us when Jews can do the work?”

Mary was haggling again but this time over him instead of a fish head.

In the midst of the shouting, Jesus saw a glimmer of golden light. It was faint and far away, but moving closer. As much as he had despaired, the sight made him glad. Jesus was afraid to wake up in Gehenna, the hell reserved for those who died outside God. A place where eternity was measured by the creeping pace of agony. The golden light flickered, and there was a voice in his ear.

“Keep still. Don't say a word.”

It was Judas, and the glimmer was nothing more than the quavering oil lamp he held in his hand. Jesus groaned.

“Did you hear me? Not a sound.”

What was happening? Jesus tried to move his head. He was lying on the floor in a stuffy room. There were straw pallets scattered on the plank floor and Jesus realized that he was in a shabby way station used by the poorest workmen for shelter when they were on the road. One man nearby was sleeping under a dirty blanket. Everyone else was awake, silently crouched, staring at the door.

When he realized that Mary wasn't there, Jesus groaned again. He had to find her. He grabbed Judas's arm, which Judas mistook for an attempt to speak. He held Jesus's jaw shut with his hand and whispered fiercely, "Romans. They're just outside. If you want to stay alive, pretend to be asleep."

But there was no time for pretending. The door burst open, and two legionaries came in, stamping mud off their boots. Behind them trailed a small, nervous man in tall black Jewish headdress. One of the soldiers pointed in Jesus's direction.

"Is that him?"

The nervous little man nodded, then scurried away.

"All right, you lot. On your feet. Now!" The legionary who was in charge barked out orders.

Weakly Jesus rose with Judas supporting almost all of his weight. He kept his eyes on the ground as the Romans approached, but they headed past him. The lesser soldier kicked the sleeping man under the blanket, who didn't stir. The soldier cursed at him. Still the body didn't move.

"Came to ground like a dog," the soldier muttered. He knelt and gingerly pulled the blanket back. The man's face was flecked with angry red spots; he had been dead a while.

The soldier leaped to his feet. "Look at him, sergeant. We haven't heard about no plague."

"Do I look like a frigging doctor? Whatever it is, we're all in the soup now." The sergeant swept the room with his sword. "Out, all of you. You're being quarantined, and no bellyaching. I'll warrant you've seen the inside of a jail before."

A grumbling procession trickled out into the alley. Judas pulled Jesus as far away from their captors as he could.

"Where is she?" Jesus could no longer hold his question.

"Gone."

Jesus's heart sank. Judas had no more to say, and seconds later they were forced back into step with the soldiers. The small bedraggled group then joined up with a larger Roman squad on the main street of the small town consisting of a row of tumble-down mud dwellings and stalls lining the highway. Mary's coins had bought them passage to this place before the farmer finally dumped them.

Shame had brought Jesus to this place. The shame of a captive people had closed around him like a noose and made him the same as everyone else. He had tried to fight for the Jews, which meant for God. The result was ashes, the same that his forebears had rubbed on their faces, swaying back and forth as they wailed their misfortunes. Jesus felt a stab of pain. He looked down and saw that both ankles were raw and red, surrounded by circular wounds.

A second stab, this time much stronger, forced a groan. And then he saw the image of a fox kit trapped in a snare his brother James had set. The trap was laid for rabbits, but the kit was small enough to get caught in it. When Jesus and James approached to free it, the kit snarled and snapped its jaws. Overnight he had been chewing on the snared leg, turning the skin and fur to pulp. Now in panic the creature tried to run, and the leg bone split with a crack. A second later the kit was gone, leaving a trail of blood and half a leg wrapped in the noose. The two boys were sickened.

"At least it can run home," James said hopefully. But Jesus knew that the kit would bleed to death on the way.

He took no hope from this memory. Sin was the noose; the kit was himself. What good had he done except to gnaw at his wound? Eventually he and Judas would be killed, dragging Mary with them. There had to be another way.

Jesus hung his head and waited until it was his turn to be marched to a makeshift jail on the edge of town. The prisoners were summarily thrown into a cramped holding cell.

"Hey, we'll suffocate in here like this," somebody shouted.

The departing sergeant shrugged. “It won’t be crowded once a few of you drop dead.” The soldiers were bored and ready for their daily ration of dried lamb and red wine fortified with brandy to keep it from spoiling.

Judas stared at the cell’s small window high and out of reach. He then rolled himself up in his robes, leaned against the other huddled bodies, and closed his eyes. “Sorry, boy,” he muttered.

The bracing cold had initially revived Jesus, but the reprieve was temporary. He felt feverish again and could stay on his feet only so long before he dropped to the floor. He fought off delirium as he squatted. Existence seemed but a hollow shell. The demons were back and gnawing away the last scrap of his heart. Fighting to stay conscious was only a reflex.

And yet the yawning void didn’t claim Jesus. He soon became aware of a man moving deftly around the crowded cell. He could barely make out a man’s silhouette as he crouched next to a sleeping prisoner before moving on to the next. A pickpocket wouldn’t find much in this place.

The man came closer. Jesus realized he was holding something out to him, a goatskin.

“Water, my son?”

Gratefully Jesus took the offered bottle and drank. “When will they let us out?” he asked, handing it back.

“You can go when you want. The Lord is with you. *Selah.*”

“What?”

The man leaned closer. “We’ve been watching you.”

“We?”

“Yes.”

The man remained crouching in front of Jesus, his eyes unseen in the dark but fixed on him.

“They know nothing, they understand nothing. They walk about in darkness; all the foundations of the earth are shaken.” The man cocked his head. “But you understand, don’t you?”

Jesus was at a loss. Like the old woman at the Temple, the stranger was quoting scripture. The man continued, “I said you are gods, you are sons of the Most High.” He leaned close again and repeated the words. “You are gods. It’s time to prove it.”

Before Jesus could react, the strange man had turned his back and was moving on to the next prisoner, offering water. Jesus reached out to pull him back, and a brilliant flash of light stunned him. It wasn’t like the previous flashes of pain he had been experiencing. In fact, the pain was gone, and Jesus felt amazingly strong and alert.

He stood up without weakness in his legs. Or rather he saw himself stand up, because he wasn’t willing his body to move. The words the strange man shared seemed to have their own power. Jesus moved without effort. Stepping over Judas, who was curled up in a ball on the dirt floor, Jesus went to the door. The man was right. It was time to prove something.

I am the son of the Most High.

The command came into his head with total certainty. The door, despite appearing locked, had been shut, but never secured. Perhaps the strange man broke in. Jesus pushed and the door swung open. Beyond it were torches fixed to the wall and two soldiers on watch. They had been playing dice on the floor, but had fallen asleep in place with their heads nodding on their chests.

Jesus paused, waiting for more direction. Nothing happened, and his heart skipped a beat. Should he run? Should he shout to wake up the others and lead a jailbreak? Silently he walked around the guards, smelling the sharp stink of liquor on their breath. A second door stood between him and the street. It wasn’t locked, and a moment later he was standing out under the stars.

Jesus headed away from town with a steady tread. He felt no impulse to run or to think about where he was going. The region was too poor for cobbled streets, so his footsteps were noiseless in the dust.

After some distance—Jesus had no idea how far—a man came out of the shadows, his face hidden under the hood of his cloak

“Master. Follow me.” The man spoke with authority, not in a conspiratorial whisper. He saw Jesus hesitate. “You’ve been taken out of captivity. I can hide you.”

Jesus said, “Who are you? I won’t go anywhere until I see your face.”

The stranger lowered his hood, exposing a thin, sallow visage circled with a trim beard more like a Roman’s than like a Jew’s. “Call me Querulus. I’m your friend.” When Jesus drew back at hearing a Roman name, the man said, “It’s not safe to give you my real name, not yet. One has to be careful. Come.”

The two exchanged wary glances, and the man covered his head again and headed down a narrow alley. Jesus followed. There was something persuasive in the stranger’s manner.

“Why did you call me ‘master’?” Jesus asked as they made their way through passages so narrow they seem to have been made for one shepherd boy at a time.

“I’m an optimist. I prefer to see what might be rather than what is.”

Jesus shook his head. “Then you’ve made a mistake. I will never own slaves or give orders to servants.”

“That’s not what I meant, master,” said Querulus. He chuckled to himself. “I’ll stop calling you that if it will make you walk faster.”

Clearly the man knew the locale. He strode ahead quickly in the dark, needing no compass or moonlight. Jesus was starting lose the strange feeling of being detached, and the

troubling image of Judas sleeping on the jail floor wrapped in filthy rags kept returning. “I have to go back,” he said.

“You will see your friends again, both of them. They have served their purpose for now.”

The stranger in the hooded cloak grabbed Jesus’s arm. They had almost reached their destination, apparently. After a few minutes he pulled open a door leading into a small dwelling identical to the others around it, except that the air inside gave off the warm, spicy scent of sandalwood. Jesus hesitated on the doorstep, and the stranger waited.

“I know that smell,” Jesus said.

“Yes, the priests use it in the Temple. Imagine how much it costs to burn something that precious every day. With enough gold, you can turn God into smoke.”

Querulus smiled and waited. He had the patience to let Jesus make up his mind whether to enter. The chill of the night air was sharpest now in the hour before dawn. On their trip through the maze of streets Jesus hadn’t felt the cold. Now it made him shiver as badly as the fever had.

“You offer refuge, and I accept,” he said, “but I can’t forget the ones I left behind. You promise to take me back to them?”

Querulus nodded. Jesus gave a troubled sigh and stepped over the threshold quickly, following the warm aroma and the promising fire that was banked in the hearth just beyond.

JESUS WOKE UP after a long, deep sleep to find the sun halfway up in the east. A young woman came into his room and placed a basin of water beside his bed, just as his mother did every morning. Jesus washed his face. He saw in his reflection that the wound on his forehead was gone; when he touched it, there was no scar or tenderness. It might never have existed.

The house was large enough to have several rooms, and the floor was wood, not dirt. Instead of rush torches, the rooms

were lit with ornate gilded oil lamps mounted on the wall, and the ceiling had been opened up in the center like a Roman atrium. People of means lived here. Jesus came into the main room, where four people were eating at a table. One of them, Querulus, the aquiline-nosed patrician whose profile could have been engraved on a coin, turned. The group had been conversing normally, like a family rather than rebels. He cut off Jesus's questions with a finger in the air.

“Not yet. Eat with us. Get used to your new life.”

Querulus spoke with the same authority as he had the night before. Jesus sat down beside him, accepting a plate of wheat cakes, olives, figs, and dried lamb. He had never had such a breakfast in his whole life. Querulus laughed when he saw how little Jesus took.

“Dig in. Not everyone starves just because they're from Nazareth.”

Jesus looked startled. The mention of his village changed the tone in the room, and quickly the other three people at the table, two women and a man, got up and left the room.

“Are they afraid to be seen with me?” asked Jesus.

Querulus shook his head. “Not exactly. But having you under our roof is serious business. Don't stare. I didn't mean dangerous business. This is a safe place.”

The way Querulus was acting as host, Jesus assumed that it must be his house. The other man—maybe a brother—was perhaps married to one of the women, while the second woman could be Querulus's wife. Jesus ate in silence pondering these possibilities. He finished the last of his drink, a honeyed wine mixed half with water.

“Why was the prison door opened for me?” Jesus asked.

“A test, a sign, an omen, or no reason at all. You know how Jews think. Haven't you worried such things to death with your blind friend, Isaac?” Jesus raised his eyebrows; Querulus waved away his surprise. “I'm not here to mystify

you. Isaac is known to us, and he made you known in turn. Then it was just a matter of finding you.”

Jesus gave a wry smile. “What makes me so precious?”

“We’ll have to see, won’t we?” Querulus got up from the table. “If you feel up to it, I have something to show you.”

Jesus nodded. He felt amazingly strong. There was no trace of his fever and no weakness in his limbs. Since being healed was part of the same miracle that freed him from jail, there was no need to draw attention to it. Apparently Querulus and his folk were used to wonders.

The two men left the house. It was almost noon, and the street was busy with activity. Querulus walked quickly, weaving in and out among the donkey carts and peddlers.

“It’s a ways yet,” he remarked, pointing into the distance. “Ask me your questions, but not all at once. We’re going to be together a long time.”

At that moment Jesus didn’t have any questions. His rescuer acted as self-assured as Judas. This implied that he wanted Jesus as a follower. Yet he had called him “master.”

“I want to see my family again,” Jesus said. “You know the way to Nazareth. Can you arrange it?”

Querulus shook his head. “Too dangerous. Word has been sent to Isaac this morning. He’ll tell your mother that you’re safe. Is that all? There has to be more.”

They had passed the last house in the small village and were heading across a field of sparse barley and weeds. Jesus thought he heard the faint tinkling of bells up ahead.

“We’re getting closer,” he said.

“Yes.” Querulus looked slightly exasperated. “If you won’t ask, I’ll have to volunteer. We aren’t rebels or fanatics. We are more like observers, but of a special kind. We observe through God’s eyes. Do you think that’s possible?” When Jesus searched for an answer, Querulus laughed. “Don’t fool yourself. You’ve been trying to do the same thing.”

The tinkling of small bells steadily grew louder, and when they came over a small rise, Jesus saw where it came from. A small wedding procession was making its way across the next field. The bride and groom walked under a white canopy held up by four male relatives. The bride's ankle bells rang softly as she went. Querulus nodded toward them.

"We're going where they're going. But it's best if we hang back for now. Discretion."

He didn't explain what they were being discreet about. On second glance, Jesus realized that the wedding procession had no guests, only the betrothed couple and the canopy bearers. Why no guests and no celebration? He would have to wait and see.

They walked another half mile under the noonday sun. The sparse fields gave way to woods; the wedding party plunged into them. They didn't hack their way through underbrush, however. As Jesus could make out once his eyes adjusted to the wooded gloom, a trail had been cleared that was easy to follow. Another quarter mile and Querulus grabbed his arm to hold him back.

"No sound," he said in a low voice. "Creep forward and watch."

The trail had ended without reaching any destination, and the wedding party had vanished. But the tinkling bells weren't hard to follow. After a moment they went silent.

"Look."

Querulus pulled back some thick branches, and Jesus saw a clearing in the woods. The wedding participants were kneeling on the soft flooring of pine needles, only they weren't alone. In front of them stood a boy of about twelve or thirteen, a strange-looking boy in scarlet robes with half a dozen mezuzahs around his neck. His hair reached almost down to his waist and was braided in tight knots.

Before Jesus had time to take in what he saw, the boy gave out a shriek and began to mumble gibberish in a fast, fevered

tone. Only it wasn't gibberish, but a garbled prayer that tumbled out of his mouth so fast the words ran together. The bride and groom also started to mumble, their words just as garbled but softer.

The boy started to twirl, his arms flapping, at first slowly, then faster and faster. He kept up the spew of words. As his body whirled, he reached into his robe and pulled out what looked like a black rope. But the rope writhed and tried to crawl up the boy's arm. The bride and groom stopped praying; their eyes widened.

"An adder," Querulus whispered.

The boy showed no fear of the poisonous snake. He thrust his arm in the air as the serpent wound around it. The bride went pale, anticipating what was to come. The boy ended his gyrations. He approached her, the whites of his eyes glistening.

"Lord, put your seed in this, your daughter, that she may be blessed."

With a swift motion he pressed the snake's head directly on the young woman's belly. He pressed hard, and the adder bit her. With a soft moan she fainted. The boy looked at the groom and the four canopy bearers, who tried to hide their alarm.

"Be not afraid. God has turned the poison to honey."

The tableau froze for a moment. Then the bride's hand fluttered toward her face, and she came to with a gasp. The men were immensely relieved. They pressed around the boy, whose demeanor was normal now, even shy. The groom clapped him on the back.

"A son? When she comes to term, will it be a son?"

The boy nodded with a confident smile. The bride was fully revived now. The groom embraced her; somebody brought out wine to celebrate.

"Enough. Let's go," said Querulus.

He pulled Jesus away. When they were out of earshot of the wedding group, he said, “This goes on every week. They’re simple people. They don’t suspect that a snake can have its fangs pulled out.”

“What if she has a baby and it isn’t a boy?” Jesus asked.

Querulus shrugged. “They’ll blame it on her. If she’s unlucky, she’ll be accused of adultery, and then it will go very badly for her.”

The weird ritual was unsettling. As they walked out of the woods Jesus asked, “Why did you want me to see that?”

“The boy. He’s you. A fake, but you all the same.”

“That’s crazy.”

“Is it?” Querulus paused at the edge of a field and gazed up at the sun. “If Judas could use you that way, he would. He’s halfway there as it is. Once he realizes that you walked out of prison and then sees you made whole again, who knows what ideas he’ll come up with? Salvation isn’t always about the soul. It can be a cause, and that’s what he desperately needs.”

Every sentence had deepened Jesus’s bafflement. “I wouldn’t cheat people the way that boy did. You seem to know what Judas wants from me. What do you want?”

“I’ll tell you. Waiting on the fringe of every society is a savior. That’s what people hunger for. A supernatural being who will make everything bad go away. Sorrow, sickness, poverty. You think your own mother doesn’t pray for that?”

The mention of his mother made Jesus bite his lip. “Go on,” he said curtly.

“To be a savior, you only need to know two things: human nature and the times you live in,” said Querulus.

Jesus frowned. “Now you sound like Judas. I won’t be used by either of you.”

“Not after the first time, you mean? What if his little fraud had worked?”

Jesus looked away. However Querulus came to learn about the sham miracle in the Temple, it would have to be added to the larger enigma. Why did he care about Jesus? What made him seek out an illiterate loner from a village far to the north? Querulus read the doubts in Jesus's mind.

"You needed to see that boy in the woods," he said. "He may be a fake, but the hunger he satisfies is real. People who are starving poor find money to give to him. He passes it along to his father, who catches the snakes and runs the sorry show. They trundle in a cart from town to town. It's a going concern."

"Which has nothing to do with me," Jesus protested.

"It has something to do with all of us," Querulus shot back. He had rested barely a minute, but it was long enough for someone as restless as he was. "Come." A moment later they were striding across the fields back to town.

Jesus felt no urge to argue. Half of what Querulus said was true. Saviors were lurking in the shadows everywhere one looked. Not all were brazen enough to take on a messianic label. They passed themselves off as magi or miracle rabbis or faith healers. Jesus had been fascinated by them as a young child, until Mary and Joseph warned him that God knew the difference between pretenders and those who worked in his name. They never explained how God knew this, and Jesus forgot to ask. The miracle rabbis and wonder-workers became scarce once the Romans began to crack down harder, enforcing the laws against them. False miracles were condemned as part of the rebels' scheme to win over ignorant rural Jews.

When the edge of town came in sight, Jesus said, "Querulus sounds like a strange name. What does it mean?"

"It means a complainer."

"Is that what you are?" Whining seemed like a trait one would rather hide than advertise.

Querulus shrugged. “We take on a name to describe the state of our soul. It’s like a code. My soul complains about being trapped in this world of suffering. Doesn’t yours?”

“Yes.” Jesus had no trouble answering quickly and simply. “If I stay, will I be given a name?”

“You already have one—‘Master.’ You just don’t happen to like it.”

Jesus didn’t reply. He remembered what Querulus had said that morning about a new life, as if he naturally belonged to their group. Did he? The strange and detached state of his mind still lingered. Jesus felt no inclination to run away. In a world without peace, his soul cared very little where he went.

8

THE FOURTH MAN

The next few days were like a silent initiation. The group around Querulus wanted to inspect the newcomer. They came to the house one by one, like shy animals sneaking out of their burrows. They acted suspicious, and Jesus wondered if he had fallen into another shadow conspiracy.

A pair of nervous brothers, old sandal makers whose hands were stained with tanning fluid and gnarled like the leather they worked, had just left the house. During their visit they spent half the time staring at Jesus as if he were a monkey on a string and the other half glancing out the window.

Jesus had never met a Roman who lived intimately among the Jews. Querulus had yet to disclose what he wanted or what he was looking for. In the meantime he was aloof with those who came to the house and even showed careless disdain for them. “The spirit is willing. Too bad everything else is weak,” he liked to say.

There couldn't be many patricians who, like him, had a Jewish wife. Her name was Rebekah, and Querulus was quick to point out that Herod himself wasn't a Jew, but had married into the faith. “It served his purpose, and this serves mine,” he said, refusing to explain any further. If Rebekah had doubts about being the wife of a Roman, she didn't reveal them. She quietly managed the household and avoided Jesus's questioning glances. As he had suspected, she shared the house with her younger sister, Naomi, and her husband, Jacob, who seemed to have no livelihood. He spent the day shut up in a back room reading the Torah.

Inside the muted house there was no urgency. That is, except in Jesus, who went to bed every night thinking about Judas and Mary. He knew he couldn't find either one on his own. And this family never went out, preferring to live behind closed shutters and opening the door only to admit the steady stream of nervous guests on their inspection tours.

“Who are these watchers?” Jesus asked again, hoping for a more concrete answer. He had no name for the mysterious group, yet Querulus had told him that they watched and waited.

Querulus replied, “These people are like little spiders sending messages across the web. Nobody suspects them. But the real watchers are behind the scenes. You'll meet them when they're ready. They never appear unless they're ready.”

“What do they do when they can't be seen?” Jesus asked.

“They serve God.”

“How?”

“By praying night and day for a savior.”

No more was added, but Jesus didn't like being at the center of a web, even if it served God. The nameless group wasn't a sect he was familiar with, like the Zealots or the Pharisees. Nobody conducted special rituals and prayers. When he followed his own practices, no objection was raised. The only unusual thing was that Rebekah, called Rivka, and Naomi performed ritual bathing three times a day, and after the lavish breakfast served to him the day he arrived, their meals were sparse and plain.

Then as suddenly as the trickle of visitors had begun, it dried up. Rivka came to Jesus's room with a folded robe in her arms. She silently held it out.

“Why are you giving me this?” asked Jesus.

The robe was pure white and finely woven. Rivka turned away as soon as he took it from her. The silent message was that he had passed the test. When he showed up at the next

meal wearing the gift, Querulus was obviously pleased. He poured himself a beaker of water—none of them drank wine—and without prompting began to tell his story.

He was born Quintus Tullius, the only son of a Roman citizen who had gambled on fortune the moment he set foot outside the gates of Rome, taking his family with him. His father offered no explanation for their sudden departure. But his wife, Lucilla, was weeping when she woke Quintus, then seven, in the middle of the night. The boy was confused and frightened. They hurried through the streets with cloaks over their faces. Before dawn they reached the port of Ostia, where a galley ship was waiting with its gangplank down. No other passengers got on board, and an hour later the Tullius family was huddled in the hold, heading east.

“What law did your father break?” Jesus asked.

“He did worse than break the law. He lost some important investors all their money,” Querulus said.

The family fled as far as Syria, beyond the reach of angry creditors and their slaves, who had no choice but to commit murder if their masters ordered it. When Quintus got older he discovered that his father had speculated in the importation of wheat from Egypt and weevils had infected the shipment, ruining it all. His father, who had enemies, suspected that the grain was spoiled before it was loaded for export. His real enemies became imaginary ones after they settled in Antioch; gradually he became a recluse.

“Now you’re one,” Jesus remarked.

“No, we’re not hiding in this house. We’re waiting, except the wait may be over.” Querulus was as enigmatic as ever, but instead of growing silent, he kept on with his story. His father found it impossible to escape the baneful influence of his imaginary enemies. His body became racked with mysterious pains; his limbs would swell without explanation; he was once found writhing on the floor with a seizure. These afflictions forced him to seek out local healers. Roman doctors were living in Syria, yet most were attached to the military, and

Quintus's father suspected that they would turn him in to the proconsul and have him transported back to Rome.

Quintus was nine when shady characters began to appear on the doorstep—a stooped, one-eyed woman who nailed charms to the lintels, a family of wandering herbalists dressed in animal skins, and any number of soothsayers carting caged chickens whose entrails would be read to discover the fateful secret behind his father's maladies.

Quintus sat at his father's feet as he seized on every healer, drank every stinking potion, and took long baths in mud shipped from the banks of the Jordan or water from healing springs in Ephesus.

"He couldn't stand sunlight, which gave him piercing headaches, so I remember living in a cave that smelled of sulfur, not a house," said Querulus. Until the day came when he woke up to find dazzling morning light streaming through his bedroom window. The boy jumped out of bed and ran to the dining room, the marble-clad triclinium where the family ate their meals, month after month, without his father appearing at the table. Now he was seated in a shaft of sunlight devouring a bowl of lentils and ham.

It was the Jews who had cured him, seemingly overnight. Not with herbs, not with charms or mud, but by praying to have God remove the demon that had possessed his father's body. This miraculous recovery arrived just in time—the Tullius family fortune was all but exhausted—and his father became twice as ambitious as before. He worked his way into the army commissary and grabbed the contract for staples like onions, garlic, and olive oil.

"He knew the Jews now, and he could work with them. They weren't suspicious of him either, so it wasn't their sacred duty to cheat him the way they did the Romans," said Querulus. "He was nicknamed 'the anointed Gentile.'"

Soon a seaside villa was bought, Quintus was sent to the best tutors, and then came the arrival of a ship from Macedonia that summer. It was sailed into port by five stricken

seamen whose bones showed through their flesh. The captain and the rest of the crew lay dead on deck, their bodies left to the sun and flies. The plague had come calling, a scourge that littered the streets of Antioch with thousands of corpses inside a month. It proved the downfall of the Tullius family. First his mother, then his father died before Quintus's eyes. The boy Quintus was wrapped in layers of camphor-soaked rags and hidden in the cellar. He somehow survived.

“My father didn't squander his second fortune. I had money, and it was assumed that I would sail back to Rome to live with my grandparents. But standing on the docks of Antioch, I knew I couldn't go back. That night I had a dream, and everything has followed from that, to this very day,” said Querulus.

He ran his fingers lightly over Jesus's new white robe. His eyes had a faraway look, and beneath the veneer of patrician coolness, an unreadable emotion yearned for expression. Querulus was never at a loss for words, but he stumbled. “I—I have nothing more to relate. The rest is up to you.”

This mystification wore out Jesus's patience. “I know why you won't tell me what you're hiding,” he said. Querulus raised his eyebrows. “You're like the others, the ones who sneak into this house like thieves. You expect something from me, but you're too suspicious. You're afraid that if you say too much, I'll use your words to set a snare.”

“False hope is a snare,” Querulus murmured, his complexion gray with defeat.

“Then at least tell me your dream,” Jesus said.

Querulus replied, “I can do better than that. I can show it to you.”

He led Jesus to the back of the house, which was a jumble of small rooms added on over time, like the chambers of an ant colony, each back room getting darker and cooler than the one before it. Someone in the past had kept building on as more children were born or poor relations moved in. The last few

rooms had no windows at all. Querulus had picked up an oil lamp along the way to light these black recesses.

“This was originally built as a place for women to hide themselves when they were unclean,” Querulus explained curtly. “Barbaric.”

He paused before a locked door and fumbled for a key. Jesus expected the last room in the warren to be the smallest, but when they stepped inside, it turned out to be large and airy, with a sizable window. Through it he spied a secret garden with green palm trees, climbing jasmine, and a bubbling fountain.

Querulus was amused by his surprise. “A pocket paradise. But that’s not my dream.”

He waited while their eyes adjusted to the light, then pointed to a chair against one wall. It was covered with a brocaded cloth. “Go ahead, lift it and see what’s under.”

Jesus pulled one edge of the cloth, which fell away. The chair beneath it was made of carved sandalwood, its fragrance adding to the heavy sweetness of jasmine in the air. On the velvet seat of the chair lay something astonishing—a gold crown.

“You stole this?” Jesus whispered. The crown was identical to the one he saw on coins stamped with the head of Herod Antipas. The circlet of gold was thick and heavy, with an inset row of jewels. However, if one looked closely, there was an empty hole where the center jewel should have been.

Querulus looked bemused. “I didn’t commit treason. This is a copy. I had it hammered out in Antioch. You can touch it if you want.”

Although he had never set eyes on anything remotely this splendid, Jesus instinctively kept his hand off the crown. The crown of roses that had infected him was a cautionary memory, yet something more powerful told him not to touch.

Querulus didn’t seem to mind. He picked up the crown and stroked the inset gems, as if this made the wash of memories

more vivid. “On the day I ran away from the steward who was appointed to take me back to Rome, I crept through the crowds back to my parents’ house. An old maid was sitting on the doorstep, wringing her hands at the misfortune that had befallen her, since she now had nowhere to go. I promised to keep her with me if we could sell some of the treasures inside and find a place for me to hide.

“That night I slept in a stifling storage room in the slums of Antioch. Even though my parents had been dead less than a month, I was quivering with excitement. I felt something one isn’t supposed to feel as a Roman: religious awe. I don’t know where it came from. I only remember lying there feeling that my body might explode with feverish anticipation. *He* was coming for me. That’s what my inner sense told me.

“But nothing happened. After midnight I fell asleep—for hours or just minutes, I don’t know—until a light opened my eyes. I was confused, but ecstatic. I jumped out of bed and threw open the window. But the light of God didn’t stream in. Instead, the whole neighborhood was on fire! The open window attracted the flames, and I jumped back to keep from being burned. I was frantic and ran for the door.

“In the darkness I hadn’t noticed a man in the shadows, but now he blocked my escape. Before I could cry out, he said, ‘Look again.’ His voice was very calm, and my panic relented. I turned back to the window, and the view had magically expanded. I could see the whole city on fire and beyond that, flames licked at the horizon. ‘The world’s on fire,’ I said in awe.

“Then a realization hit me. I whirled around to the stranger, who was dressed in a white robe and wore a gold crown. ‘Do something!’ I cried. I knew with total certainty that only he could save the world.

“He shook his head. ‘My time hasn’t come. But a few know of me already. Watch and wait. Prepare the way.’

“He emitted such a wave of love that I ran to embrace him with a heart more full than it had ever been toward my own

father and mother. My arms never touched his body, but closed around empty air. At that moment I awoke in bed. Under the dream's influence, I ran to the window and threw open the shutters. Outside was the dark alley. I startled two stray cats fighting over a half-eaten rat."

Silence descended on the two of them after Querulus finished his story. After a few silent minutes, Querulus noticed something. "You're trembling."

Jesus didn't deny it. His hands were shaking; his face was drained of color.

With a peaceful quietness Querulus pushed the crown toward him. "Touch it. I can't die without my dream coming true."

Jesus knew then that the gift of the white robe was the first step, and this was the second. "What if your dream destroys me?" he asked weakly.

"It won't. It can't." Querulus was pleading now. When Jesus still recoiled, he said, "You know the world's on fire, don't you? I can't be entirely wrong about you."

Against his will, Jesus nodded.

Seeing that his young guest was bathed in sweat, Querulus relented. He replaced the crown on its cushion and threw the brocaded cloth back over the chair. He handed the oil lamp to Jesus, so that he could find his way back, and left the room. An hour later, when Jesus reappeared, nothing was said about the incident.

If the family noticed that he was still wearing the white robe and took that as a sign, no one commented on it. The very next day, Jesus disappeared.

THE ONLY THING Jesus did was step out of an ordinary house into a bustling dirty street. But for the first time in his life he was completely alone. Every face was a stranger's, every wall a secret barrier. He didn't know the name of the place or where

he should go. To turn back to Nazareth was the most dangerous choice, by far.

But he couldn't stay with Querulus anymore. That much was certain. The haughty old Roman had become infected with the Jewish disease: signs and portents. Because he couldn't stand the horrors of life, he sought divine messages, a wink from God that said, "I understand. I'm coming." Standing on the threshold, Jesus didn't know whether to say "I'm sorry" or "I pity you." Half a street away, he realized what he should have said to Querulus. "*No one is coming.*"

Jesus kept to the shady side of the street, wandering from one cluster of crumbling mud houses to the next. In the shadows his gleaming white robe wasn't as shocking, but still caught every passing eye.

He disbelieved Querulus's dream, but it had affected him. After the story, he had lingered in the room staring at the brocade-covered chair, which was a kind of altar, really. Querulus worshiped his fantasies there.

Noon passed. Jesus stopped by a shallow bubbling spring around which a cistern had been built. He spoke to the empty air. "If you're following me, let's all rest."

He drank a ladle of water and sat down with his back against the cistern. If the watchers were tracking him, he hoped they could see that he was hungry. One halting old man leading a donkey came up to water his animal. He nodded, maybe with a certain significance. Jesus couldn't be sure; the gesture was too brief. The man could have been one of the timid visitors to the house. Jesus almost spoke to him.

Between the sun and his hunger he dozed. Hours slipped by. The clatter of wagon wheels woke him up. The sun was low, and workers from the fields had returned to the safety of the walled town. Rough men stripped to the waist bathed in the cistern, casting suspicious glances at Jesus.

"Brother, are you needing the way back to the road?" one of them asked. It was a suggestion and a threat. The man's

muscles looked like ropy knots under his sun-baked skin.

“I need a meal and a roof for the night,” Jesus replied mildly. As he got to his feet, his joints ached from lying against stone.

“Nothing like that here,” another man grunted.

In the glaring silence, Jesus walked away.

Hostility didn’t surprise him. When he’d opened his mouth, they’d heard his accent, so it could have been worse. They could have seized him and rubbed dirt into his offending new robe or knocked him out and shouted for Roman guards.

He hung his head to avoid notice, and after a while the puffs of dust grew thicker around his sandals. The main road was approaching. When a bird’s shadow passed overhead, the slanting sunlight made it look immense. Jesus gazed up and saw a starved crow settling on a low roofline. It stared arrogantly and hunched its shoulders, adjusting its metallic feathers but not flying away. For some reason Jesus was reminded of Judas. In the last few days, Jesus hadn’t given much thought to either Judas or Mary. Now, for a reason he could not name, he realized that he had to reject them as companions and continue to move on by himself. Perhaps it was the same disease—signs and portents—that made them expect too much, more than he could ever give. He had to find a place that wasn’t infected, and the only way to find one was alone.

Oblivion might have swallowed up the rest of the story, except for the smallest turn of fate. With the village behind him, a blast of heat made Jesus raise his head. It was as if high noon had returned at dusk. He saw a small, agitated crowd up ahead. Men shouting and waving their arms ran past him. An outlying house in the village stood between Jesus and the setting sun. It shimmered and swam in the air, and suddenly he realized why: the house was on fire. The flames were made invisible by the sun’s greater light.

More men ran past, sloshing buckets of water. Women wailed. There was no well nearby. The house had been built too far from town. Someone screamed out a name, then another. They were trying to locate the family who belonged to the house; a terrible suspicion grew that they were still inside, silenced by heat and smoke.

The running men stumbled over Jesus and cursed him when they did. He had sunk to his knees in the middle of the road, transfixed by the fire. Images flashed in his mind of the Nazarene house that the Romans had set to the torch, and Isaac's relatives who had perished inside. Querulus's dream was springing to life.

But these powerful thoughts were not what mesmerized him. Jesus heard the trapped family calling him.

As clearly as if he could see through the mud walls now streaked with soot, he spied a mother and two young daughters. They were huddled in a corner, too far away from a window to run for it, sealed off by fire that licked its way up the walls to the tinderbox wooden ceiling. Jesus heard them call again, but not for the father—he must be the man who had tried to run into the inferno but was held back by three stronger friends. The father struggled to break free, a tortured silhouette against the sun and fire.

Jesus! Jesus!

The trapped ones were screaming his name. For a moment he knelt and listened. A wave of fear should have coursed through him. It didn't. Jesus knew that the place he had to find, the one place that wasn't infected, the center of purity, lay before him.

It was the fire.

Rising to his feet, he headed straight for it. "Hey, stop him! Are you crazy!"

The shouts reached his ears from far away. The fire had become too intense for anyone to stand near it anymore. Nobody thought to seize the stranger the way they had seized

the desperate father for his own good. Jesus smiled. Not at the nearness of death or because the heat made his facial muscles constrict, but because a picture had come to mind.

He saw three men in a furnace singing God's praises. He couldn't name what book they were in or much of their story. A wicked king had thrown them, three inseparable young friends, into a fiery furnace. But instead of burning to a crisp, they stood there and laughed and sang. As a boy Jesus had gone around for several days muttering their names under his breath like a holy chant: *Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego*. It wasn't an easy chant when you were five years old, and he was proud of himself for getting it right.

He muttered it now, wondering if the sound would guide his soul to Nazareth one last time before it flew to Paradise.

Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego.

All the women screamed when the stranger in the luminous white robe strode into the raging fire. He got past the front door just as the lintel beam crashed to earth, weakened by the falling walls. More of the roof caved in, and through the hole that was made flames shot higher into the sky, like demons released from their cage.

As for what happened next, the young man who walked out with the mother and children safe under his cloak, like a dove sheltering new fledgling chicks under its wings, wasn't the only one who knew the story of the fiery furnace. People spoke about it throughout the village that night, in between the celebrations for the rescued family, who were dazed but unharmed, thanks to God.

Around the rabbi's table the story was told most accurately, of course. In the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, the noblest sons of Israel were captured and brought back to Babylon. Daniel and three friends were among them; their fate was to be treated as honored captives. They would be trained in foreign ways—perhaps even inducted into the mysteries of the magi—and learn to devote themselves to a foreign god.

But when Nebuchadnezzar erected an idol and decreed that everyone in the city should bow down to it whenever they heard the sound of flute, zither, and lyre, the three friends refused. The king grew furious and ordered that a furnace be built especially to burn them alive. On the appointed day the furnace was fired seven times hotter than normal, so hot that the soldiers who threw the condemned into it were burned to death themselves.

After a time Nebuchadnezzar ordered the furnace door to be opened, but when he looked inside, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were alive and walking around, surrounded by flame. The king fell back in awe and released them on the spot. Everyone in the village knew that part, but the rabbi remembered a forgotten detail.

“There was a fourth man inside that furnace when it was opened, but only three had been put in. You understand?” The rabbi took another long drink of wine and gestured for his wife to pass around the platter of roasted haunch of goat one more time. It had been a miraculous day and fitting to God that they treat it as such. “Scripture tells us he was no ordinary man, but looked like *a son of the gods*.”

Later, and a little drunk, the rabbi called for his scrolls to be unwrapped, and he pointed to the passage in the book of Daniel. His eyes watered up.

“I don’t have to tell you why I remember this detail. Do you have any doubt who came out of that fire today? Three, and a fourth.” He lapsed into a significant silence so that his words could hang in the air. Three, and a fourth.

Which was how the miracle was remembered after he died and the story passed on to his sons and their sons after them.

9

SECOND BIRTH

Walking into the fire had been easy. His body remained calm, trembling only slightly when the heat became intense. Gazing at the flames, he heard a voice say, “*My son.*”

This voice seemed to come from the fire itself, in a beckoning whisper like the hiss of dry leaves burning. He followed the whisper, and with each step the heat eased, even as the wind whipped his hair wildly about.

My son.

The two words made him safe. When he stepped into the heart of the inferno, nothing could harm him.

The woman and her two children cowering in the corner had pulled their black woolen scarves over their faces to keep from suffocating. Only their eyes were visible, wide and terrified. Jesus had never seen anyone so terrified by the nearness of death. He then realized that they were afraid of him, not the fire. The smaller girl cringed when he gathered her in his arms.

She clung to her mother. “Don’t let him kill me,” she begged.

The mother, overcome with smoke and fear, allowed Jesus to wrap his arms around the three of them. He took them through the flames, and a moment later they emerged. The small crowd fell back; water buckets dropped to the ground. The husband cried out his wife’s name. She rushed into his arms, dragging her children behind her. Nobody made a move toward Jesus, though. They were frozen with awe. The only sound was the sobbing of the husband and his bewildered

family. Strangely, Jesus still wanted to walk down the road, the same thing he'd wanted before he set eyes on the burning house.

He had to move through the crowd to get back to the road. He kept his eyes forward, not looking to either side. Then the strange hypnotic spell suddenly broke. People cried out. Hands reached for Jesus, and there was no way to stop them. He wrapped his arms around himself to keep his white cloak from being snatched off his back. The hands wanted to seize the miracle, to tear away a piece that could be saved and hoarded.

One pair, Jesus noticed, was more gnarled than the others. It belonged to a bent, wizened old woman. "Do you have a barn?" Jesus asked. He had no idea why he picked her. She nodded.

"Take me there," he said. He gently touched the old woman's hands, and amazement crossed her face. She shouted in the local dialect, waving away the others. Whatever the cry meant, they backed off, and she led Jesus away from the road. The old woman mumbled in disbelief and couldn't stop looking at her hands. They crossed a small field by way of a narrow path, and behind a screen of cypress trees there was a small barn.

"You don't want to come into the house?" The old woman fixed on him quizzically and pointed toward a sun-baked mud dwelling beyond the barn.

He shook his head and went into the barn, fading into its cool shadows. She knew not to follow him. An angel of mercy can suddenly turn into the angel of death if God wills it.

Inside, the sheep manure was pungent. His entry caused some lambs to bleat. After a second his eyes adjusted, and Jesus saw two ewes penned up with their newborns. Their prudent owner wanted to shelter them for a few days before exposing the lambs to the wild. Jesus noticed a ladder leading up to a loft where what remained of last year's hay was stored. He climbed up and lay down.

I am the son.

The words came clearly, without effort, and he believed them, feeling the last gold rays of daylight fall on his face. The sun was setting through cracks in the sagging timber roof. The air in the barn was musty and cold. Jesus wondered why he wasn't struck with amazement. He had done nothing to become the son, any more than a baby causes itself to be born. But like a baby, he had emerged from some kind of invisible darkness, and the world was reborn with him.

If God had any further explanation, he kept it to himself. The ewes moved toward a small manger filled with fresh hay and began to chew. The lambs jumped around, too frisky to sleep. Jesus must have slept, however, because the next thing he knew, there was a thump against the mud wall down below. It was too dull to wake him up, but another thump followed, then a third. He rolled over on his side and peered through a crack in the wall. In the gray-blue dimness before dawn some villagers had found him; they were throwing rocks at the barn. Several more hit with the same dull thud. The sheep bleated nervously. Jesus came wide awake.

As he climbed down the ladder, he didn't wonder what mood would greet him. The people would be joyous and awestruck. The miracle of the day before told them who he was.

Why, then, did the villagers scowl when he came to the barn door? Several of the men had lifted new rocks, and instead of dropping them, they held them at the ready.

One shouted, "Who are you?"

Jesus recognized him as the angry workman bathing at the cistern. One of the poised rocks got thrown, and it barely missed Jesus's chest. The man had taken a wild shot; he couldn't see well in the predawn dimness.

"Who are you?" the voice repeated, harsher and louder.

Jesus turned away. His first impulse had been right; he should be walking the road, not lingering here. The road was

his vanishing point, his salvation. Without looking behind, he felt the villagers follow him. They kept quiet, scowling. It was clear that it would be good enough if the intruder, God-sent or Devil-sent, just disappeared. His feet found the narrow path across the field. Jesus walked it without rushing, and the small band tailed him single file. They made a strange sight, like a hen and chicks, all in a row.

The main road appeared. Jesus heard no one behind him. The villagers stopped, waiting until he was out of sight. Each step brought a new sensation, not relief, but a swelling rage in his chest.

Jesus whirled around. The knot of people now stood just over ten paces away.

“Who am I?” he said with cold fury. “I am the light!”

God, who was in a merciful mood the day before, had a whim to be mischievous now. Like the manager of cheap theatrics, God drew aside a thin veil of clouds. If cymbals had been at hand, they would have added a splendid effect. As it was, the sun fell upon Jesus’s white cloak the very instant he uttered the word “light.” What could his onlookers do? Their suspicion and petty anger were flimsy nothings, swept away by a flood of awe.

They committed blasphemy by uttering Yahweh’s name, falling to their knees in the dust. Their mouths gaped open, and Jesus couldn’t help but see the image of a hen and chicks again.

You shall feed them.

Like the words from the fire, these came from the sunlight that made Jesus’s robe almost too dazzling to look at. He listened and nodded. It was so easy. The light had come to him, and he would give the light to them. He crossed the small distance between himself and the villagers. One man was so dazed that his fist still clutched a rock. Jesus took it away and threw it in the air. Every eye followed its arc until it plunked to earth far down the road.

“I am the light.” This time Jesus said it gently, without a trace of anger. The man who had been clutching the rock started to cry. Jesus touched the man’s shoulder. Tears drew dirty streaks down his cheeks, and his chest heaved.

As easy as it was to walk into the fire, to be the son and give the light, Jesus was now at a loss to understand the magnitude and limits of his gift. He no longer felt the call of the road. He needed to find out what all this meant, and to do that, he had to return to town.

THE FIRST PUBLIC place he came to was the town cistern. Word had clearly spread. The women who were filling their water pitchers fled as soon as Jesus appeared. The earliest workers had already come and gone, but that still left a dozen men. Without looking at them Jesus took off his cloak, folded it neatly, and put it on the shelf of the cistern wall (sending up a small prayer that nobody would steal it). Stripped to the waist, he waded into the water and washed himself. Two day’s grime and soot from the fire caked his skin.

“What do you see?” he asked, not fixing his eyes on anyone in particular. “How am I different from you?” The crowd didn’t answer. One of the street urchins kicking a ball on the fringes shouted, “You don’t belong here!”

“Is that why you sent these men to stone me?” Jesus nodded toward the knot of attackers who had followed him from the edge of town. “Not for any sin or blasphemy, but because you imagine I am different?” The cool water running down his bare arms made him shiver. “Moses was a stranger in a strange land. If you are his children, so am I. Would you now make me a stranger?”

Still no one spoke, but he sensed that his listeners were relenting, just slightly, like a leather bow string that must relax or snap when it has been taut too long.

“How did you walk through fire?” someone asked.

“No man can walk through fire, but the spirit can. I have no other explanation,” said Jesus.

“Rubbish. You’re a magician, and half of them are possessed by demons. Why should we trust you?” Onlookers were stirring now, more willing to voice their suspicions.

Jesus looked at the one who spoke up, a swarthy, squat muscular man in a leather apron. A blacksmith. Jesus saw that he was angry and had been all his life. What could he say that would penetrate that armor? Every man there lived behind a wall as thick as the town’s ancient rampart. Jesus paused, then he took a small clay jug—half a dozen lay around for public use.

“See?” he said. He scooped water into the jug and held it high. “This water is like the holy spirit.” He slowly tilted the jug and let its contents stream over his head. “If I let the spirit rain over me, it makes me pure and clean. But half an hour from now it will be dried up and blown away. Sweat and dirt will soil me again.”

He took the jug and filled it once more, holding it close to his chest. “But if I take the same water and cover it and put it in a cool place, it will last for days. You all know this.” Jesus waited to see what effect his words would have.

“Explain your meaning,” someone called out impatiently.

“Your heart is like this jug—fill it with the holy spirit and keep it inside yourself. Then it won’t dry up and blow away. One day you will be amazed, for God knows where your secret places are. When you least expect it, the jug will overflow, and then you will walk through fire or do anything you want. Nothing is impossible when the spirit is full within.”

There were some astonished whispers mixed with grumbling. Jesus paid no attention. He climbed out and wrapped his cloak around his half-naked body. “You have a right to know who I am. I am Jesus, from Nazareth. One or two of you have the same name. If not you, your brother or cousin. But a name means nothing. I will answer to it if you

call me, but my soul won't. It abides with God and answers only when he calls."

A low hum of approval went through the bystanders, all but canceling out the grumbles. Jesus smiled to himself. It had become easy to say the truth since his new birth. He couldn't even find the part of himself that used to be afraid of the truth. One of the older men, grayer than the others and probably poorer to judge by the mends in his brown robe, came forward. "Visit my house. Let me feed you," he said.

"Why?" Jesus asked.

"Because you're hungry," the man said. "You'd rather starve?"

Jesus smiled and patted the man's shoulder, which was more bone than flesh. "I'll go with you. You've come to me in peace. Let us feast."

"Oh no, don't expect a feast," the old man mumbled, his lip quivering.

"I must expect one, and so must you. How else would our Father want us to live, if he truly loves us?"

The bystanders were jostling around them, and they all heard what Jesus said. He put his arm around the old man's shoulders and walked down the nearest alley. No one followed except the street urchins, and they had no idea what happened once the two disappeared behind the door of the old man's hovel. Rumors are the fuel of wonder, however, and soon the whole town was quite certain. The old man had opened his cupboard, which that morning held only a cracked jug of water and half a loaf of stale bread wrapped in a dirty rag. But now, a feast tumbled out. All the towns-people saw it in their mind's eye. They vicariously ate the delicious sweetmeats that poured out and emptied the wine cask that the stranger had filled.

One thing is for certain, instead of napping, everyone was kept awake by excitement during the long afternoon except for the old man himself. He slept all day and through the night.

When the morning sun struck his thin eyelids, he found his visitor was gone.

BEFORE DAWN JESUS went into the hills to wait. God had lifted him up and carried him very far, but he knew God's ways. Whenever he exalted a son of Adam, what came next was always the same. Catastrophe, a fall, a shattering crash. Moses had been lifted highest of all (not counting Lucifer), to what end? His people were saved. They arrived at the land of milk and honey. Out of all the wandering, starved, despised, and exhausted multitudes, Moses alone was denied the final reward.

Jesus stood on a rise overlooking the town. Down below wisps of smoke rose from house fires; a few lanterns twinkled in the sleepy windows. Moses had died on a mountaintop after one last look at the promised land. Knowing that he was condemned, he could still bless the children of Israel—his children, who would outlive him in tears and sorrow. Then old Moses climbed to the summit of Pisgah to perish alone.

“Do what you will, Father,” Jesus called aloud. “But if you love me, bury me yourself when it's done.” The wind whipped harder and whistled in his ear.

“Will I die so full of sin that you will renounce me completely?”

Jesus didn't believe that the empty air heard him. But scripture said that God buried Moses with his own hands in an unmarked grave. Jesus gazed at the desert scrub, which was browner and more sparse than the fragrant pinewoods he knew at home.

A tiny quiver caught his eye. A nearby rock had trembled. No, it was a hare. The whole time Jesus had been arguing with God, the poor creature—a sad, scrawny gray excuse of a hare—had frozen stock-still, trying not to breathe. Finally it couldn't help itself and had released one shiver of fear.

“Go in peace,” Jesus murmured.

The hare darted off in a quick burst, as if shot by a spring. It didn't care about going in peace, just getting away without a broken neck.

Jesus watched the puffs of dust the hare's thumping feet kicked up. A day from the past came to mind when he had sat on a rock sunning himself with Isaac. He must have been all of ten.

"You're quiet. What are you watching?" the blind man asked.

"A rabbit. It can't decide whether to run away or not."

The rabbit, a small fat female, was watching them anxiously, tempted to come closer by a tuft of sweet April grass.

"What's hunting it, a fox or a weasel?" Isaac asked.

Until then, the boy Jesus hadn't noticed a predator around. Isaac's keen hearing picked up something, the snap of the smallest twig, maybe. Jesus squinted into the distant brightness.

"A fox," he said. He picked up a rock and hurled it at the fat rabbit, which darted away in panic. The fox, which hadn't crawled close enough for a chase, emitted a disgusted yip. It waved its brushy tail in their faces and trotted off.

"Always on the side of the innocent," Isaac remarked. There was a tone in his voice. Jesus was surprised.

"She was defenseless," he said.

"So?" Isaac lifted his eyebrows. "You want to protect the innocent. Let me tell you, God isn't just in the rabbits. He's also in the foxes. So your little act of kindness deprived God of a meal."

Jesus laughed, conceding the point. But he was stung nevertheless. Isaac could tell.

"I'm not teasing you, boy. I worry about these things every day. The innocent, the guilty. The hunter, the hunted. If God is

just, why do the meek shed their blood while the vicious grow fat?"

Isaac said nothing more. The day was hot for spring. He held his hand up to shade his shriveled eyelids ringed with puckered red folds of skin.

"We should be getting back," Jesus said. He reached for the blind man's arm, but Isaac resisted, keeping his sightless eyes fixed on the sun.

"God's light sometimes burns me," he said. "That's no reason to run away from it."

Now Jesus wished he could go back to that moment, because he knew just what to say. "Don't worry anymore. The innocent and the guilty, the hunter and the hunted. There is no need to judge them. God wants to save them all."

Jesus headed back to town. The first person he saw was a youth stabbing at a parched field with a broken spade. When he set eyes on Jesus, the youth stiffened.

"What can I do for you, rabbi?" he said. He kept his head down and his voice low. Word had spread everywhere.

"I need a guide," said Jesus. "But you must take me through the most deserted streets you can find. Are there places set aside for the sick and dying?"

The youth nodded.

"That way, then," said Jesus. "And don't be afraid, but I have to go where the holy women are."

The youth looked confused; he didn't know that lingo.

"The women who walk with men when God isn't looking," said Jesus. He smiled, but the youth turned red and couldn't stammer out a reply. Without a word he pointed the way to a narrow crack of an opening in the village wall. Soon they were creeping down lanes too narrow even to be alleys. All the houses were shuttered, but Jesus heard faint moans and smelled a stench of vomit and dying flesh. With a wordless blessing he promised to return. For now, he let the youth lead

him, spying around corners to make sure no one was outdoors before waving Jesus on.

The brothel area was close by. It smelled worse than the streets of the dying, because heavy sweet perfume mingled with residues of the rotting stench. The youth waited for Jesus to catch up.

“I can’t go any farther,” he said. Where the boy had taken him was forbidden, but it would be worth it when he ran back and told everyone his tale. He started to back away, but Jesus held him by the nape of his neck through his coarse robe. “I am not here to sin,” he said.

“Of course, rabbi.” The youth discreetly kept his eyes toward the ground, but he couldn’t hide a faint smile.

“Look at me,” Jesus said. “If the town drives me away because of you, there will be no more miracles. You understand?”

A stubborn stare came into the boy’s eyes. “Where’s my miracle?” he said, wheedling.

Had it come to that already, in less than a day? Jesus would have wrapped the collar tighter around the youth’s neck, but then he realized. They weren’t his miracles to give or take away. He closed his eyes and waited.

Through him words came out.

“Your grandmother will not die this season. She will rise from her bed in a week.”

Perhaps the youth’s eyes widened; a cry of gratitude may have swelled his throat. But Jesus had already turned aside and was marching toward the first house on the street, its painted door decorated with a blue snake coiled around an erect phallus. A Roman sign. The main customers would be soldiers, and they wouldn’t be able to read Hebrew.

“Master!”

The youth was calling after him, but Jesus didn’t look back. Even if God had spoken through him, it made him sick

to barter with miracles. He stopped at the door and knocked. No one opened it, but a woman's voice called from inside.

“Too early. The girls are asleep. Come back at noon.”

Jesus knocked again, harder, and after a pause the door opened a crack. A short woman with henna in her hair and an uncovered face appeared. When she saw that Jesus was a Jew, she hurriedly drew her sleeve across all but her eyes. “Didn't you hear me?”

“I'm here for Mary. Bring her to the door.”

The woman, who must have been the procuress, became suspicious. “She's not here, and she ain't seeing nobody. Not till noon.”

“Bring her.”

Jesus had been guided to the town, but didn't need a divine message to seek Mary out in the brothel quarter. It only made sense that she needed some way to survive.

But now he smelled, through the sweet perfume mixed with the rotting stench, something else. A mixture of saffron, cumin, and coriander that was familiar, because Mary had carried a packet of those spices with her when she fled Jerusalem. A dozen times on the road she had sprinkled them on the fish heads and lamb entrails that her copper coins had bought for dinner.

“I know she's here. I can smell something.”

“We're here to smell it too,” a man said angrily. “Up close. So get out of the way, Jew.” The voice came from behind him, and it was Roman. Jesus turned around and faced two infantry soldiers. They were disheveled and drunk. The one who spoke leered at him.

The procuress gave them an oily smile. Regular customers. She opened the door and bowed. Jesus didn't move aside, however.

The other soldier became truculent. “Didn't we tell you to shove off?” His hand went to the handle of the sword hanging

by his side, but his companion, who was in a better mood, clapped Jesus on the shoulder.

“He don’t mean it. Go in. We’re all brothers beyond this blue door, ain’t we?”

The procuress, who was anxious not to have a fight on her hands, yanked Jesus inside. Caught off guard, he stumbled over the threshold, pushed from behind by the impatient legionaries. One could hear the low talk of girls in the next room, punctuated by giggles. Even in the dim light the procuress could see that the soldiers’ faces were growing red and urgent. She called out, “Get ready. Uncover yourselves, darlings. Early gentlemen.”

She drew aside a curtain, revealing a low divan covered with sheepskin rugs. Lounging on it were two girls, caught by surprise without their heavy makeup. They let out timid shrieks, and the soldiers burst out laughing. One ran to the couch and began pulling up one girl’s flimsy shift to expose her legs.

It felt like a dream to Jesus, a flickering appearance. He wasn’t embarrassed, even as the scene became lurid and the girls reached out to grab for him. Jesus turned slowly, with the dreamlike sensation that he was a phantom, and then he saw who it was. Mary had entered the room. She was dressed in a coarse robe with an apron tied around her waist, a wooden spoon in her hands.

You. Mary’s mouth formed the syllable without speaking.

Being dressed like a cook didn’t protect her, however. One of the drunken soldiers caught sight of her. “That one!” he cried, pushing aside the naked girl who was clinging to him. He lurched forward from the divan stripped down to his linen undergarment, not hiding his aroused state. Mary looked away. She didn’t want to meet the soldier’s avid, greedy eyes, and she couldn’t look into Jesus’s.

Jesus had said nothing, had barely moved, but his presence irritated the Roman. “Best leave us alone, Jew. Unless she’s

your sister, you don't belong here." With a rough paw he shoved Jesus toward the door.

The sensation of moving in a dream still held as Jesus watched his hand ball into a fist and swing through the air. It struck the soldier's jaw silently, but at that instant Jesus heard a loud crack as the bone broke. Blood spurted from the soldier's mouth and his eyes turned to saucers as he went down.

The next sound was Mary's voice. "Quick!"

The other Roman roared like a bull and staggered to his feet. Jesus caught a glimpse of gleaming steel as a sword was drawn from its scabbard. But Mary had already pulled him out into the street, running barefoot over rocks and refuse, and even though the roaring continued behind them, a naked legionary who had just tripped over his fallen comrade wasn't likely to give pursuit.

10

CAPTIVE

Mary was still running when Jesus held her back. “We can walk away,” he said. “I am watched over.”

“You weren’t before. You wound up in jail,” she said, looking back nervously at the brothel. “I couldn’t stay in that place. A farmer brought me here in his cart.” She pulled her shawl over her face. So far, nobody had rushed out after them.

“Listen and hear me. I am watched over,” said Jesus.

His calmness shocked her. He had lashed out in anger a moment ago, but the storm passed as quickly as it arose. Wherever Jesus had been hiding, he had found new clothes and lost the air of a fugitive. Mary tried to will her heart to stop racing with panic. She glanced down at his right hand. The knuckles were oozing red from breaking the Roman’s jaw.

“You’re bleeding,” she said.

“A little.”

Jesus ignored the wound. He had his mind on other things, in particular the scrabbling crowds that would soon swarm around him. As soon as they reached the main part of town, he and Mary wouldn’t be able to talk together. He took her hands.

“You don’t have anything to explain. I know you didn’t go back to what you did before.”

Mary met his gaze steadily; her lips didn’t tremble. “I thought I’d never see you again. I waited in a hiding place. I was too afraid to search for you. Judas is a coward, so I knew he’d run away. I gave a coin to a boy on the street, and he ran

to spy around the jail. He told me that the quarantine was lifted and everyone let go.”

“Judas isn’t a coward,” Jesus said. “He’s canny. I imagine he ran some place underground.”

Mary looked bitter. “He abandoned us both. What else matters? I’m relieved you didn’t run away with him.”

There was an awkward pause, and then Mary said, “You came for me. What are you going to do with me now?”

Jesus was startled. “Help you. What else?”

“You really don’t know?”

When Jesus didn’t reply, Mary said, “No man will have me anymore. I’m like an apple core once the fruit is eaten. You must know that much, at least.”

Jesus looked away. “I don’t think about that.”

“Well, you should. You’ve gone through too much to be a boy anymore.” Mary sounded almost angry. “When you and Judas kept me with you, you tainted yourself with a fallen woman. Don’t deny it.”

Jesus hung his head. “You are outside the law. We both know that.”

“And where are you, inside the law?” She didn’t wait for a reply. “Do you think I’m Eve? I didn’t disobey. I was forced outside God’s blessing, and now any man can do with me as he wants. That’s why I asked what you’re going to do with me.”

Jesus had to face the truth. He had no idea why he kept trying to find Mary. He would never marry her, and therefore it was forbidden in the commandments to keep company with her. Was it his conscience that made him refuse to let her go? No, because he had walked past dozens of fallen women on the road—beggars, whores, the sick and lame—without taking them up.

He said, "I told you I wanted to help you, but that's not the whole truth. I *must* help you. I don't know how, but I can't let you go until I find out."

By now a band of street urchins had spotted him; they ran away emitting shrill whistles to alert the town.

Soberly he said, "I want you to know the truth. You almost didn't see me again. I was walking away when it happened."

Mary didn't ask what "it" meant, so she must have heard about the miracle at the burning house. Could she tell that he had changed overnight? It was impossible that she didn't see it.

For the first time she seemed to suppress a feeling of shame. Her eyes dropped, and she said, "You should walk away now."

"No."

"They'll drive you out if you're seen with me."

Jesus lifted her head. "Too late. God already sees you with me."

Mary said nothing, allowing Jesus to pull her down the street by the hand, ignoring the open stares of strangers who were starting to emerge from the shadowy alleys and side streets.

"You belong out here, in the light," said Jesus. "I was weak before. I had my doubts, but not anymore. Stay with me."

His tone of voice baffled her. "You're the first man to speak to me this way since—"

"Since your fiancé was betrayed to the Romans," said Jesus. "God saw you weep. He saw everything."

"Then why did he let me—" Finishing the sentence was too painful. Her tears began to flow.

Jesus said, "I don't know what God intended. Here, wipe your cheeks. They'll think you have something to be ashamed of."

Erasing the streaks of her tears with her sleeve, Mary shook her head. If she had wanted to speak, she would have been quickly drowned out. A throng was closing in from all sides, gathering faster than she could have imagined. Voices clamored, “Master, master! Over here!”

Jesus barely had time to lean close and whisper, “God made something innocent in you that nothing can touch. Love that part, as I love it.”

Hands were pulling Jesus away now, tugging at his robe and arms. A wailing peasant woman threw herself between him and Mary, screaming incoherently. Once the wedge was made, they were flung apart by the surging mob. Jesus was whirled around, and although he tried to keep his eyes on Mary, she was jostled to the edge of the crowd as it thickened and swelled.

In her fear she saw the mob as a ravening beast, ready to rip Jesus apart before her eyes. The image made her shudder. But he didn’t allow the beast to spring. Mary couldn’t see how he did it, but with a glance Jesus made the seizing hands let go. He said something out of earshot, very softly, and a ripple went through the crowd, settling the air like a cool breeze after a thunderstorm.

When it was quiet enough to be heard, Jesus said, “Where are you taking me? Speak up.” No one answered. There was no single purpose behind the mob except to get close to him.

Jesus met the eyes of the packed circle who pressed closest to him. “Even in synagogue when everyone wants to be near God, there’s room to kneel.”

People pushed back, and a little more space was made around him. Mary was amazed that she could hear Jesus so clearly; it was uncannily as if he still whispered in her ear. Was this happening to everyone?

Jesus spoke and the words flowed as if he had given this speech a thousand times. “I wandered the hills near my village when I was a boy. I had no idea where to go. No one expected

anything of me. For all I knew, I was forgotten by God. Who hasn't been bothered this way?" He had adopted a new tone, as if reminiscing with a friend. His gaze scanned the crowd, which calmed down even more, before he continued. "One day I was exhausted with worry, and my feet were cut and bruised by rocks. I sank to the ground under a tree.

"I only intended to be there a moment, when I spied a sparrow. It flitted to one spot in the dirt and pecked at a grass seed. A second later it flitted to another spot, then another. In my eyes there was no pattern to its action, just a witless sparrow zigging and zagging, getting nowhere.

"Suddenly my eyes were opened. How many generations of sparrows have lived this way? Many more than the generations of men. They had no plan where they were going. But God's hand has guided them these thousands of years. If he can find seed enough for sparrows, what more does he want to do for you?"

The crowd murmured. No one had ever spoken to them this way. Jesus raised his voice. "I ask again, where are you taking me? If you don't know, then release me. I am only God's sparrow. He must want me to zig and zag some more before he tells me what to do."

With some mumbling but no resistance the crowd parted; a path was cleared for Jesus to escape. As soon as he came to the end of the path, it closed behind him, and the crowd followed in his wake. Mary was left at the rear among the stragglers. From around the corner a Roman patrol suddenly appeared, coming in their direction. She was almost certain she didn't recognize either of the soldiers from the brothel, but she walked faster and melted into the crowd.

Mary thought she heard one of the soldiers say, "Should we break them up, sergeant?"

There was a gruff reply, but nothing more. She stole a glance backward. The patrol hung back, trailing the crowd with weapons sheathed. They looked indecisive—it would be

futile to disperse a mob that outnumbered them by more than ten to one.

Up ahead Jesus walked casually, as if he were alone and without direction. The crowd followed, until they came to the open market entrance and a familiar figure. As soon as they laid eyes on him, the crowd rumbled angrily. It was a squat Roman in a dirty toga sitting on a stool. He was positioned to watch anyone who came or went. Between his legs was a leather bag, in front of him a small table set up as a writing desk.

“Don’t go near him, master,” a voice called out.

Jesus turned in its direction. “Why not?”

“You’ll just be robbed. He’s a thief!”

Jesus regarded the squat Roman, who resembled the tax collectors he knew from Nazareth. Perched by the shore where the fishing boats came in or situated at the mouth of the market, their presence was as predictable as vultures.

“Do you despise this man?” he asked, not waiting for the chorus of boos that answered him. “I know as well as you what the Romans have done to us. It’s time to pay them back. Who has a coin?”

The crowd was baffled. A coin? They expected Jesus to command them to rush the tax collector and attack him. Apparently so did the squat Roman, who nervously pulled the drawstrings of his leather money purse and shoved his pens into his sleeve. Mary glanced back; the armed patrol had drawn nearer. Their weapons were drawn now.

Jesus paid no attention to the rumbling, but kept his hand out until someone placed a copper coin in it.

“Stay here.”

He had enough control over the crowd that they hung back as he approached the tax collector, who had grown more nervous. He brusquely tried to wave Jesus away. “Are you bringing goods to sell? If not, you don’t have to pay.”

Jesus held out the coin and spoke in a low voice. “Apparently God wants us both to play our parts.”

“What your god wants means nothing to me,” the man hissed.

“Does staying alive mean something to you?” With a flourish Jesus dropped the coin on the tax collector’s desk. The ping of the coin as it landed caused the crowd to break out in fresh boos and something more ominous, a low, angry bellow against Jesus.

“Fraud! Hypocrite!”

He turned. “Who is a hypocrite? He who obeys the law?”

“Not Caesar’s law,” someone called. “Only God makes laws for us.”

“I see. Then God must curse you, because whoever disobeys Caesar’s law will certainly be imprisoned or die. Let me ask, am I still a hypocrite or are you?” he shouted.

There was a sharp whistle from the back of the crowd. The Roman soldiers were splitting up and taking positions, calling out signals while sending for backup. From where she stood Mary could see the soldiers approach. What had made Jesus suddenly want to commit suicide?

The front ranks of the mob threatened to boil over and rush at him, but his glare kept them back.

“What did you think your messiah would do?” he shouted. “Wipe out the Romans with a magic finger?” Jesus had never uttered the word *messiah* before, but he knew the whispered rumors born of desperation. Only the crudest magicians, the kind who pulled red and green scarves out of the ears of children and simpletons, weren’t called Savior of the Jews.

“The messiah wouldn’t lick their asses,” a man shouted back. This time it wasn’t a voice lost in the crowd, but a tradesman wearing a tool apron who stepped forward.

“I will tell you the truth,” Jesus said steadily, meeting the man’s hostile stare. “You have no idea what the messiah would

do. Neither do I.” He lifted his head toward the crowd. “But here’s another truth you have thrown into the dust. A great abyss stands between the kingdom of Caesar and the Kingdom of God. Have you not been told this over and over? Romans are ignorant of God’s laws, so they have no choice but to lay down their own.

“Is God offended? How can he be? Worldly affairs do not touch him. The richest Roman will die unworthy to touch the hem of the least of you in Heaven. Then be as God is. Before you speak of the law, know what kingdom you belong to. Otherwise, you are no better than hypocrites.”

By this time a dozen garrisoned soldiers had materialized to back up the patrol; they were positioned behind the crowd with shield and sword at the ready. Jesus had insulted the emperor and defied his authority, which was reason enough to charge forward and take him. But he had also done something else—he had quelled a mob with no more than words. The sergeant in charge hesitated; the others waited for his orders. Their main purpose was to rescue the tax collector, but Jesus now touched his shoulder and nodded. The crowd watched tensely as the squat Roman packed up his desk and scurried away through the half-deserted marketplace. In a moment he had disappeared, and the spark went out.

“Stand down!” the sergeant ordered, loud enough so that the Jews knew his men were there.

Mary held her breath. A second spark could still ignite. Riots had broken out over less. Except for a few malcontents, no one responded to the implicit threat, however. The men in front of Mary were tall, but for a moment she caught sight of Jesus between their bodies. He wore a strange expression on his face. His mouth smiled, but his eyes were sad and inward. A visible wave of exhaustion passed over Jesus as the mob dispersed, his shoulders suddenly sagging. It had cost him more to bring peace than to break a Roman’s jaw.

The power of Jesus’s speech had made Mary shudder. Was it dread or hope? If the latter, this was hope that might die

before it drew its first breath.

THE ROMANS SUDDENLY had more trouble on their hands than another pretend messiah or whatever deluded madman the Jews were following that week. A petty official was killed as he was walking home from the public baths, stabbed from the shadows by the same kind of *kanai*, or “knife men,” who caused trouble in the north. Such an occurrence was rare in the south, so when a second killing occurred—this time of a senator’s profligate son who had been exiled to Judea to save him from a murder trial in Rome—the noose was tightened. For a week the open markets were closed, along with the baths. More rashly, the provincial governor ordered a guard posted to keep the Jews from attending the local synagogue. A mob rose up in fury outside the gates. The guards were stoned and barely escaped with their lives.

Any Jewish property owner retreated behind locked doors. Only the poorest sought out Jesus for help. He was no longer in town; they had to find him in the hills, where he went to pray and sleep at night. Jesus took Mary with him, which under normal circumstances would have scandalized the new followers, but the crisis at hand kept them from complaining.

For several days in a row contingents of poor besieged him. To all of them Jesus said, “What would you have me do?”

Answers shot back. “Lead an army.”

“Send an earthquake.”

“Call down the angel of death as Moses did. We can mark our doors with blood to show the angel we are Jews so we’ll be spared. Wasn’t that the lesson of Passover?”

“Moses called down nothing,” said Jesus. “It was God’s will. The lesson of Passover is that he decides.”

When his beseechers went away grumbling, Mary asked him privately, “Could you stop the Romans?”

Jesus, who was escaping the noonday sun under the shade of a twisted olive tree, looked quizzical. “Didn’t you listen?”

Mary nodded. “You said that it was God’s choice. Doesn’t God act through you? Then it becomes your choice.”

Jesus turned away without reply, but that afternoon he led her across the fields to a thicker part of the woods. They hacked through underbrush, which suddenly opened onto a clearing.

“I saw a boy do a miracle here. It satisfied what everyone wanted. It didn’t matter if the miracle was true or not.”

Jesus seemed to search around, then he found something. At first Mary couldn’t tell what it was. He took what appeared to be a fallen stick and lifted it up—wrapped around it was a dead black adder, its head crushed.

“The miracle left this behind,” he said. “The people were tricked, and then the tricksters killed this creature to hide their deception.”

What was she supposed to understand from this? “You’re not like that,” said Mary.

“Unless I’m the snake,” Jesus said, bluntly staring down at the dead reptile.

When she followed his gaze, Mary fell to her knees. The snake, its head a pulp of crushed bones and dried blood, was crawling up the stick toward Jesus’s hand. It quivered, and its destroyed head regained its former shape. A flickering tongue shot out. The snake hissed, and Jesus dropped the stick, letting the adder make its escape through the grass. Mary felt her heart pounding.

“The Adversary,” she whispered.

Was it really the Devil’s work? Jesus didn’t reply. But clearly his own lesson had been turned against him. Something beyond death was reaching out to him.

Several days passed in a blur. Jesus kept to himself wandering the hills. Mary made camp and left food and water

out for him. She never saw Jesus take any, but when she woke up in the morning, the plate and jug were empty.

Finally he reappeared, kicking at the stones around the campfire, stamping out the flames. With one word Jesus wanted them to set off again: “Judas.”

Several times before the trouble began, Mary thought she had spied him on the fringe of the crowds that constantly followed Jesus through the streets. But the man always kept his hood up and took care never to be standing anywhere near Mary. Once they started asking around, however, Judas’s name was well known in the streets.

“Judas wants recruits. That’s why he’s not being as cautious as the Zealots,” Jesus offered. He had no doubt who was leading the kanai and fomenting the local assassinations.

In less than a day the street urchins, fountains of all knowledge about the underground, led Jesus and Mary to the edge of town farthest from the Roman garrison and pointed to a cluster of outbuildings. What looked like a ramshackle barn surrounded by sheep pens had a door in the back. Jesus knocked, and Judas himself answered.

“You’ve come,” he said, registering no surprise. He let them in, keeping his gaze on Mary and away from Jesus.

The back of the barn was floored and fitted out like a house. Sitting in a circle was a group of young men. Alarmed, a couple of them reached for their sheathed weapons. Judas said, “It’s safe,” and everyone waited for what came next.

“Are they holding you captive?” Jesus asked. The irony in his voice took Judas aback.

“They’re loyalists,” he said sharply. “Willing to die for God. Didn’t that bring you here too?”

Jesus smiled to himself, all but saying, *You didn’t answer my question.* He took a seat on the floor outside the circle. Mary sat down behind him.

“Has violence worked so well at home that you bring it here?” asked Jesus.

Judas shrugged. “What choice do I have?”

“Ah, that’s right. You tried miracles already.”

“We tried them,” Judas reminded him. “Only it seems that one of us has gotten better.”

In Mary’s eyes Judas hadn’t changed. Since he was released from jail, his hair and beard were rougher, his cloak was torn and clumsily mended. Judas stared Jesus down but saved a darting, covetous glance for Mary as he spoke. “Join me. I’ve made a start, and I know you haven’t lost your will. Now you need to prove that you can fight.”

“What if I listen to you?” asked Jesus, shaking his head. “We’d both be captives then.”

It was the second time he’d used the taunt, and Judas allowed a flicker of irritation to break his confident expression. “Our people are crying out for freedom. Whatever you say, you can’t argue against that. The cowards and the rich will keep hiding. Is that the side you want to join? Or do you plan to lead them?”

“I’ve thought about that for several days,” said Jesus quietly. “And you’re right. I can’t lead the cowardly and the rich.”

Judas already had his mouth open to interrupt, but this sudden change of tone caught him off guard. “What are you saying?”

“I will follow you. That’s why I’ve come.”

A smile creased Judas’s thin lips, at first of disbelief. His gaze flicked between Jesus and Mary. He could read the shock in her face. “You’re serious,” he said cautiously.

Jesus let his head bow slightly. “What the Father wills, I cannot resist.”

Mary couldn't stand it any longer. "No!" she cried. She would have jumped to her feet, but Jesus turned and placed a hand on her shoulder.

"You're free," he said. "Decide on your own. I told you I was watched over. Do you believe you are?"

As gentle as his voice sounded, the words stunned Mary like a betrayal. She had assumed that he would take care of her, that she was under his protection. Jesus read her thoughts. "I can't protect myself, so how can I protect you?"

Mary was in consternation—the last thing she wanted was to have Judas overhear this. He seemed to relish the confusion. "I'll protect you. Stay. If Jesus won't beg you to, I will."

The young men in the circle weren't hiding their feelings, which contained suspicion of Jesus and delight that a woman had come to serve them. Judas's smile broadened. "Don't worry. I can hold them in check."

Mary wanted to weep. Her eyes kept going to the door and her mind to the possibility of running away. What else had she been doing for months, ever since the Romans left her bereft? She forced herself to lean close enough to whisper to Jesus, which made the young men laugh.

"What will happen to me?"

There was no pity in his eyes. "You'll be hurt much worse if I pretend that my road is easy."

He stood up and held his hand out to Judas. After a last hesitation, Judas seized it. He didn't understand this unexpected pact, but he knew that it wasn't safe to have Jesus as a rival.

"You'll be my second," Judas said. "No one here will question your authority once I give the word."

"Except one," said Jesus quietly.

Suspicion returned to Judas's face, but before he could say anything, Jesus said, "I told you I can't resist God's will. He

brought me here because you aren't safe. The traitor who threatens your life is in your midst."

Jesus didn't wait for Judas's reaction. "I'll join you tomorrow after I have bathed and purified myself." He took Mary by the hand to leave. "The problem isn't that the Romans already know your schemes and have sent someone to defeat you. The problem is that you think it's me."

Judas couldn't help himself. "Is it?" he snarled.

Jesus shook his head. "All you have to fear from me is that I come in peace."

11

THE FIRST AND LAST

Jesus and Mary walked slowly away from Judas's hideout. Whatever commotion Jesus's parting words had caused, it was muffled by the building's thick mud walls.

"How can you bring peace to someone who doesn't want it?" Mary asked.

Jesus replied, "I don't know. My feet walk where they are guided. I speak words that aren't mine anymore."

It was strange to realize the truth of what he said. As a child Jesus had lagged behind his father on the road one day, lying under a tree to gaze at the sky dappled through it. Joseph didn't worry since he had only a quarter mile to go before he reached the next job. The boy fell into a doze, only to be awakened by shouting.

A small crowd stood in a clump in the middle of the road. The shouting came from its center, and once Jesus fully woke up, he made out words.

"Kneel before me, I command thee! I wield the thunder. I crush the mightiest works of kings with one breath. Be afraid!"

To Jesus's surprise, a few in the clump of bystanders fell to their knees. Over their heads he saw a man dressed in tatters, apparently the remains of a rabbi's garments. He wore a long black beard, and his head bobbed back and forth violently, so much so that Jesus wondered why the man's head didn't fly off his shoulders.

"Tell us your name, rabbi," someone in the crowd said.

The bobbing grew more furious. “Fool! To hear my name is to be consumed in the fire. Did I not say that unto Moses?”

A few more sentences like this and Jesus realized that the man was speaking as God. Curiosity made the boy get up and approach. The bobbing head turned in his direction. Jesus was repelled—he hadn’t seen that the ranter’s cheeks were pierced with nails and his hair matted with fresh cow dung.

For some reason the sight of Jesus created a disturbing change. The tattered rabbi fell down and began to eat the dust of the road. His words were no longer coherent. The crowd dispersed, except for the few who remained kneeling, waiting for God’s next gnomonic utterance.

The memory troubled Jesus now. How was he any different from that? He couldn’t prove that God spoke through him any more than he could prove that God didn’t speak through that pitiful wanderer.

Except.

He would have turned to Mary and revealed the miracle of the burning house. It was his one proof. But at that moment Judas’s band of rebels burst into the street like the contents of an exploding cauldron. Jesus and Mary ducked out of sight to watch.

Some had pulled out their curved knives, others came to blows with fists. The clamor drew Judas out into the street. He had lost control over his followers, and the whole group hurled insults and suspicious accusations at one another.

Judas plunged into the melee. “Lackeys, fools!” he shouted. “Run home to your mothers. I don’t care.” He brandished a knife at the closest of the brawlers, who backed off immediately. “I have no use for any of you.”

Up and down the street curious onlookers filled the doorways. Still arguing, the young rebels ran away. Their voices faded, and soon the scene was silent again.

“Now there will be peace,” said Jesus. “The hornets’ nest had to be smoked out first.”

He stepped out of the shadows so that Judas could see him. “Don’t be furious. The Father has brought you a blessing in disguise.” To Judas, Jesus’s mild tone concealed a triumphant smirk. He couldn’t see it in the dark, but the very idea roiled his anger.

“Why did you come here? To practice sabotage?” Judas shouted. “When the Romans close their nets, you won’t be left out. Or did they pay you?”

Jesus ignored the taunt. “Did you find your traitor?”

“Go to hell! You made him up.”

Jesus ignored this too. “I suppose they all cast suspicion on each other.”

“What else?” Judas snapped.

“Then you were running a conspiracy of traitors. It was only a matter of time before one of them turned the others in. It’s you who won’t escape the Romans’ net.”

Hearing his words thrown back at him, the fuming Judas approached, his fists balled up. Jesus smiled. “Real warriors aren’t as prudent as you. They’d use a knife, even with all these people watching.”

Once the brawl ended, all the neighbors had gone back inside, except for the most curious, who raised their lanterns to see what Judas might do.

Jesus had no fear of Judas. He pushed his fist down and said, “It’s time to choose, and you only have a few minutes.”

Suddenly Judas realized the danger he was in. Some bystander up or down the street was being paid off at that moment. The Romans took street brawls seriously when every mud hut could be concealing a clutch of rebels. Judas looked nervously over his shoulder.

“Why are you wasting time on him?” Mary interrupted. “We need to save ourselves.”

Jesus shook his head, keeping his gaze fixed on Judas. “Do we stay together or not? Decide.”

Judas’s body rocked back and forth with indecision. “She’s right. What use are we to each other?”

“I was your first disciple,” said Jesus. “Where you go, I go.”

Judas found this unbelievable. “There’s nothing to follow anymore. You saw them scatter. There’s nothing left to undermine, if that’s your game.”

Jesus shook his head. “Be grateful that they deserted you. They left an empty place that God will fill if you let him.”

Judas was too confounded to consider if this was a veiled taunt. Recklessly, he bolted. Without a word, he turned and ran in the direction of the fields and woods, leaving Jesus and Mary to follow.

But Mary wouldn’t. “We can’t go with him. It’s crazy,” she protested. For a long time she had the measure of Judas, and Jesus’s loyalty to him made her angry and confused. Try as she might, his motives were unreadable.

Knowing it would be futile, Mary pleaded. “Give me one good reason why you, who are blessed, should follow a man like Judas?”

“I must. The Father wants me to. If that’s his will, you’re safe too.”

Mary wanted to accept that Jesus followed God’s will, but that was the problem, not the solution. A man moved by God alone was like a leaf blown before the wind or a bird zigzagging from perch to perch. No plan, no direction could be seen.

As doubtful as Mary was, her fear of the Romans overrode everything else. They began to run. Their fleeing sandals slapped sharply against the stones. Echoes amplified the sound, as if their pursuers were already closing in. It wasn’t

safe to duck into a house along the way. Jesus's status as wonder-worker wasn't secure enough yet.

They met Judas on the edge of town. The moon provided their only light, but Jesus's skill at following trails in the dark hadn't faded. After a while the runaways found the camp Mary had made the night before. The banked fire still held a glow under its thick blanket of ash. The three could warm themselves and eat before bedding down among the olive trees.

They broke bread in silence. To the eye, nothing had changed from their days on the road. The previous days could have been a dream—there was no sign of an arrest or jail or miracles. Three wanderers sat out under the eternal stars, each lost in private thoughts.

After Mary had drawn some distance away to wrap herself in a blanket and sleep, Judas said, "I know you. You're not cunning or malicious. You don't have the mind for devious schemes. What do you want?"

"Haven't you asked that question every time we've met?" said Jesus. "Maybe the answer hasn't been revealed to either of us."

Judas hunched his shoulders against the cold. He kicked at the embers to extract some licks of flame. "I need a better answer than that."

Jesus put his hand out and touched Judas's shoulder. "From the moment we met, you have been the leader. I accept that. The Father speaks to me, and he tells me to follow you. Not for my own good, but for yours."

Judas jumped to his feet in agitation. "See? That's what you always do. You make meek speeches, but you're after me somehow. I'd rather be damned on my own than saved by you."

"Even if God has chosen us for miracles?"

"Us?"

“When he sends rain, it falls on everyone the same. Maybe this is the great time for all his people. You won’t find out unless you step forward to receive with an open heart.”

Before Judas could reply, Jesus held the palm of one hand over the fire. Instantly it sprang to life, as if a new log had been thrown on it. Judas stared, transfixed.

“God speaks in mysterious ways,” said Jesus in a low voice. “Look closer.”

Judas didn’t need to be ordered—his eyes widened as the flames flickered, seeming to reach toward him. Suddenly Judas fell to his knees, putting his face so close to the flames that his complexion glowed red and sweaty. He stayed this way for a long time, long enough that for days afterward his face resembled the scalded hands of a washerwoman.

When the fire finally died away, Judas couldn’t speak. His whole body had seemingly dissolved. After some time had passed, he managed to croak two words. “It spoke.” Jesus nodded and waited. They both sensed that the next thing Judas said would be critical, perhaps fatal.

“It said that God would give me greatness if I repented.”

Jesus was gentle, as if handling a frightened child. “Did it tell you how to repent?”

Judas shook his head. “Something I couldn’t understand. The first and the last.”

“Good.”

Judas looked at him with bafflement. “You know what that means?”

“It means being first in this world is like being last in God’s. We’ve both struggled to be first. I’m as guilty as you. Now we’ve been shown the way out. Become last on purpose. Surrender. How can we discover God’s will unless we give up our own?” Jesus got to his feet, being careful not to touch Judas, who couldn’t stop trembling. “It’s cold. You ran away without your cloak.”

Jesus took off the white robe he had been wearing and draped it around Judas's shoulders.

"How will you keep warm?" asked Judas. He sounded weak and embarrassed, but he knew he needed the cloak if he wasn't to freeze.

"Don't worry. I'm provided for," Jesus said. "I seem to have no control over that." He walked away and soon vanished in the darkness.

Whatever Jesus meant, Judas didn't ask. He was beginning to lose the uncontrollable tremor that all but rattled his bones. The fire had been a sign from God, but this wasn't the strangest thing. The strangest thing was that God knew him now, down to his marrow. He had been stripped clean by the fire; there was no escaping God's sight from this moment on.

Judas felt a wave of revulsion and humiliation. If God knew everything about him, did that mean Jesus did too? The possibility caused his mind to turn cold. Judas wrapped himself up beside the fire and tried to sleep. He lost consciousness almost immediately, but sat up with a start an hour later, staring groggily at the rising sliver of the moon. It wasn't the light that woke him up, however, but a sound.

A stranger was lurking nearby. Judas was about to call out, "Who goes there?" when he saw something. A shadowy silhouette just beyond the reach of the feeble campfire. And then something else, the silhouette's eyes, which glowed red in the dark.

As fear paralyzed Judas, the silhouette didn't approach, but sat down on the ground, the glowing eyes fixed on him. The demon—for what else could it be?—said, "Jesus does know you. Nothing escapes him."

Judas's jaw was locked, but after a moment his terror abated slightly. "Who are you?" he asked in a hoarse croak. "What do you want?"

"I want to glorify you. Jesus would have you surrender to God. Don't be a fool. Surrender is defeat."

The demon was echoing the doubts Judas spoke only to himself. “The fire told me I would be saved,” he said.

The demon replied, “The fire has no power to decide. Your instinct is to fight. Who has the right to make you change? You choose. You decide.”

Judas wanted to cry out that he chose salvation. But his heart was writhing. A war had started inside. He moaned, curling up into a tight ball.

Go away, he begged silently. Go away.

Nothing happened. In the darkness and silence, night creatures scurried back to their meal of worms and insects. The rising moon gave off a faintest glimmer, just enough to show Judas that he was alone. He had heard two voices in one night, one of hope, one of terror. That Judas couldn't tell them apart felt like his curse.

WITH THE DAWN something mystifying started to happen. Jesus became more contented and Judas more disgruntled. Having no more rivalry between them didn't satisfy Judas's soul. It was decided, by him alone, that they would wander around the Dead Sea until they found a safe village. It was too dangerous to return to where his band of rebels had been, and staying outside in the wilderness would only lead to exhaustion and starvation.

“If you're a true disciple, you'll show me how you do your miracles,” said Judas. “God won't permit the servant to prosper and not the master.”

“If it's God's will,” Jesus said, directing his eyes toward the ground like a servant.

Judas snorted. “Keep it up. If you don't show me your miracles, either you're a fraud or you're lying about following me. Time will tell.”

As they wandered Judas made Jesus do all the work, piling his back with their clothes and supplies, barking at him to find

firewood every night and fetch water from hidden springs in the desert that took hours to find. The minute Jesus got back with pots of water on his shoulders, Judas set him to cooking supper. *He's turned him into a woman*, Mary thought. Most of this work had once fallen to her, but now Judas forced her to stand by, doing nothing as Jesus carried out every order without protest, no matter how petty. This show of meekness somehow made Judas boil inside.

One morning she caught Jesus alone when Judas left camp to scout the next village. His parting gesture was to kick the ashes of the fire in Jesus's face, accusing him of letting it die overnight. She said, "Why are you smiling? He's turning you into his slave girl."

"Should I be miserable instead?" replied Jesus. "If doing women's work was the way to despair, half the world would be despairing." He was kneeling in the dirt tying up their few thin blankets and making a pack out of the pots and vessels they carried with them from campsite to campsite.

In frustration Mary knocked the pots out of his hand. "Tell me what this is about or I'll run away. I'd rather be a whore again than watch him do this to you," she cried.

Jesus silently retrieved the scattered clay pots, one of which had broken when it struck a rock. He stared at the splintered shards. "You shall break them with a rod of iron, and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel."

"Stop mumbling," Mary grumbled. Feeling her rage drain out of her, she collapsed on the ground beside him.

"I wasn't mumbling. I was explaining, the way you wanted. Do you recognize what I said?"

Mary lifted her chin. "I know some things. Not as much as a man." She quoted from the same psalm. "Serve the Lord with fear, with trembling kiss his feet." She shook her head. "Is that what you're doing? Serving Judas out of fear?"

"Haven't the Jews served the Lord that way, generation after generation, and what good has it done? More suffering,

more punishment. We are the children of fear, except when a disaster strikes, and then fear turns into terror.”

“But you were given the power to change that. All you have to do is touch someone. I’ve seen it.” Mary wanted to take Jesus’s hands to underline her words, but she didn’t dare. He had become too different from any man she had ever known.

“If I use my power, people will become afraid of me too. And why not, if they fear my Father so greatly?”

By now Jesus had gathered everything they needed to move on that day. He sat down on the bundle of blankets and regarded her. “There is only one alternative to serving God out of fear. Serve him out of love. If I am to learn how to do that, what good is it to pick someone I already love, like you?”

Mary drank in those words. She hid her exhilaration behind a question. “So you chose someone hateful?”

Jesus smiled. “Judas isn’t hateful. His mother found love in her heart for him.”

“You’re not his mother. Look at him. Every day he treats you worse.”

“I wouldn’t need faith if he treated me well, would I?” Jesus picked up a speck lying in the dust between his feet. “Can you tell what this is?”

Mary shook her head. She was in no mood for a lesson, but she knew that berating him anymore was pointless.

“It’s a seed,” said Jesus. “Of what I’m not sure. It could be mustard or a fig. They look alike, both tiny black specks.” He tossed the seed into the scrub brush a few feet away. “That seed may fall on a rock or hard ground too barren to let it sprout. But nothing is certain. We could come this way years from now, and in the middle of a field of weeds there could be a magnificent fig tree. What is a speck today could feed a whole family tomorrow.

“I am that seed, and God has cast me among the weeds. But he didn’t lose sight of me. I will fall on hard ground, or I will feed the multitudes. Let God decide.”

“And that’s your reason for taking Judas’s abuse?” Mary sounded less bitter, but only slightly.

“Yes. If God is worth revering, it’s out of fear or out of love. I can’t live being afraid of my own Father. I choose love.”

WHEN JUDAS REAPPEARED, he announced that the next village was safe. Jesus was loaded down, and they made their way to the place. The day had turned hot, as it did in the south even in early spring. Not a word was shared on the road until they passed fellow travelers on the narrow desert path.

Judas rebuked Jesus for looking away as the strangers approached. “Let them see you. I want to know if they recognize their savior.”

None of the travelers recognized Jesus.

The next village resembled all the others they had passed through, equally full of dismal poverty and hollow-eyed denizens hanging around the streets like actors waiting for a drama that never began. Beggar boys followed the strangers with gaping curiosity. Judas ignored them all. He had his eye out for something, or someone, else.

When he spied an old mendicant slumped against a wall, he snatched the pack roughly from Jesus’s back. “Come on, then.”

He pulled Jesus by the collar of his cloak which was coarse, brown, and a size too big for him. Judas had kept the white one and thrown his old cloak over Jesus’s shoulders.

The mendicant heard footsteps; he looked up warily, not sure whether to hold out his hand or hunch down in case the two strangers rained kicks and blows on him.

“Good masters,” he whined.

“What can be good when I see you thus afflicted?” said Judas, raising his voice enough to be heard up and down the street.

“It’s true, I have been sick. Alms, sir?”

The mendicant felt brave enough to take off his wool cap and hold it out. “Give bread to the poor and you give it to God.”

Judas crouched down beside the beggar, who looked disappointed when he didn’t hear the jingle of coins. Judas gave a curt nod, and Jesus crouched on the other side. “Take his hand,” he ordered.

Jesus obeyed, taking the mendicant’s right hand while Judas clasped the left.

The old man grew alarmed. “What are you doing?” He would have cried out, but arthritis had weakened and wasted him, and he had endured too many fevers. His shriveled hands fluttered like fallen birds in the strangers’ grasp.

Jesus said, “There’s nothing to fear, old one.”

“What good is your pity?” Judas asked with sudden harshness. “God has shown me this poor man for us to heal. Grip his hand tighter. I will pray. We can do this together.”

He glared with gimlet eyes at Jesus, who realized now why Judas was pleased that nobody recognized him on the road. This village was a clear field, a fresh start. If Jesus let Judas take the credit for a healing, the clamor would center on him.

“Ready?” said Judas. He made no effort to hide that this was a test. His mouth curled up at the corners as he squeezed the afflicted man’s hand. It was a wonder his gnarled finger joints didn’t turn to powder. “I have brought my most beloved disciple to you. Fear not.”

The mendicant’s eyes widened with anticipation. He began to mumble an incoherent prayer scraped together from half-remembered verses. Judas also prayed; his words were loud

and clear. “Lord, you alone have the power to heal this, your son. Send me the gift of healing, not for my sake, but to pass it on to one in need.”

Passersby began to take notice of the spectacle. Judas didn’t open his eyes to see what Jesus was doing. “Do you feel it, little father? Do you feel the power?” he asked. A few bystanders began to murmur, watching and wondering.

The old mendicant trembled. “Yes,” he whispered huskily. “I feel—something.”

Mary was hanging back, half hidden in a doorway several yards down the street. She saw Jesus let go of the old man’s hand. He got to his feet and looked around. Spotting Mary, he gestured for her to come, but he didn’t wait. She caught up as he was rounding the next corner. She had grabbed up their bundled possessions from the street.

“I knew you wouldn’t heal him. How could you? It was a trick,” she said.

“That’s not it,” Jesus replied calmly. He didn’t glance behind to see what Judas was doing. “He can order me all he wants. Ordering God is a bit more difficult.” Jesus smiled. “Now that he has a crowd, I wonder how he’ll get out of there.”

“He’ll talk his way out. That’s my guess.”

“Or God might fool all of us and heal the man. Imagine. Judas might even believe then. If his heart holds out.”

Jesus was in very good humor. He took the bundles from Mary and put them over his shoulder again. Up ahead they could see a sign—a white dove scratched in chalk on a rough board, holding an olive branch in its beak. “We’ll stop at the inn. Judas will find us when it’s over.”

Which he did. The crowd evidently hadn’t torn Judas to pieces. Finding Jesus and Mary on a bench in a far corner of the inn, he marched up, towering over them.

“Give me one reason why I shouldn’t kill you here and now.” Judas’s face was pale with fury.

“I gave you your miracle. You got away,” said Jesus.

“I got lucky. The old fool was a crook. He was faking his afflictions, and when the crowd grew ugly, he threw his hands up, bawling to high heaven that I had healed him. He wanted to get out of there.”

“Just like you,” said Mary. Her jibe didn’t divert Judas’s focus from Jesus, who looked smaller than usual as he sat on the low bench beneath Judas.

“Maybe you did heal him. Maybe God secretly saved a man,” Jesus said, not meeting Judas’s glare.

“Don’t be ridiculous!”

Suddenly a voice called out. “Judas!” A short man, his head hooded, came up. From Judas’s expression it was obvious that he was one of his scattered followers. Judas wasn’t pleased.

“How did you find me, Micah?” he growled.

“Never mind. The question is, why you haven’t found us?” The man called Micah threw back his hood. He was older than the hotheaded young men who were in Judas’s band. His face was swarthy, with a scar at the hairline.

Judas evaded the question. “Have the Zealots penetrated this far?” he asked.

Micah nodded. “We even have a capture. Come. And bring your friends. You’ve attracted too much attention already.”

They got up to follow the conspirator into a back room. Mary found herself light-headed. “Steady,” Jesus whispered, taking her hand.

Past the back room and down a corridor, Micah showed the way into the cellar. As they descended the stairs, their eyes adjusted to a pair of smoking torches in the hands of two men. Startled, the two grabbed for their weapons.

Micah held his hand up. He was apparently the chief, because the two guards obeyed immediately. He turned to Judas.

“I have news from Simon. We were worried about you,” he said. “Then we got word from Jerusalem. You failed in your mission. Simon was disappointed. Very disappointed.”

Jesus glanced at Judas, who revealed no emotion. Under any ordinary circumstance Micah’s veiled threat would have been a death sentence. But Judas had his eyes fixed on something. A blindfolded man was bound hand and foot, his body stretched out on a table in the dark cellar. Streaks of dried blood told that he had been tortured.

Now the sound of voices caused him to emit a muffled moan. He tried to speak, but only garbled sounds came out.

One of the guards approached. “If you’d told us what we wanted to know, you’d still have a tongue,” he said. He slapped the blindfolded man with the back of his hand.

The victim, who had raised his head, let it slump back onto the table again. He went silent, probably from passing out. Traces of military garb were left on his torso, with an insignia.

“An officer. You got yourself an officer,” Judas said. He looked at Micah, seemingly unafraid. But Jesus sensed that Micah was the worst of the worst. His fanaticism meant more than life to him.

Judas inquired, “Why didn’t you ransom him?”

“He’s a special envoy from the proconsul, Pontius Pilate. They know his name in Rome. Next month they’ll find his head in an alley. We have to make them afraid, not just our own priests and Jewish collaborators.”

The two guards grunted their approval of Micah’s tactic. Their leader smiled faintly. “But there’s still leftover business, isn’t there, Judas?” he said. “You failed.” He edged closer to Judas until he was almost in his face.

“Not me. This one.” Judas indicated Jesus. At this, Mary started to cry out, but Jesus seized her arm and squeezed it just in time.

Judas continued. “You, Micah, weren’t in the council. Simon sent me to test the courage of a new recruit. When the time came, he couldn’t go through with it.”

Micah looked suspicious. “Why didn’t you get rid of him? Better dead than a coward.”

“I’m too soft-hearted,” said Judas. “I felt the impulse to give him a second chance. I shouldn’t have.” Even with the threat of death hanging over him, Judas kept his cool demeanor. “He begged for his life, and I told him he would face one more test.”

Judas pulled out his knife and held it up. “Let him kill your Roman. You’ve done well. Your captive is ready to die.”

Micah looked skeptical, but Judas turned quickly to Jesus, pressing the knife into his hand. “Go ahead. Kill the enemy. It won’t make amends for failing, but at least we’ll know how loyal you really are.”

Jesus drew his hand away, but Judas folded it tighter over the knife. “You claimed that God came to help me today. Let’s see if he helps you.”

Jesus met Judas’s gaze steadily. “He will.”

Micah shook his head. “It’s not much to finish off the half-dead already.” For the first time Judas blanched. He would have tried a more desperate strategy, but Micah had more to say.

“On the other hand, the alternative is for me to kill your new recruit.” He directed a leer at Mary. “And since your lovely companion knows everything now, she would have to be eradicated with him. Do you know what I call that, Judas?”

Judas shook his head.

“Messy. I have one corpse to sneak out of here. Two more is simply messy.”

Judas didn't reply. He and Jesus and Mary were in the hands of a sadist. Micah was in total control, and they were helpless to do anything but let him play out his nasty game.

Micah approached Jesus. "All right. Kill him. It won't be a true test of loyalty. Let's consider it probation." He brandished his own knife. "Of course, not everyone passes probation."

The bloody prisoner moaned again. His body strained against its bonds—he knew what was coming. Jesus stepped closer. He held the point of the knife directly over the Roman's heart.

Mary cried out. "No!"

"What would you have me do, resist this evil?" asked Jesus.

"Yes, you have to. We can die together."

Mary was sobbing now. The conspirators stood ready to rush at her. Jesus kept speaking as if they were the only two people in the room. "If God had wanted to destroy evil, he would have brought the world to an end. He didn't. He offered us a covenant of peace instead."

No one knows what would have happened next, except that suddenly the dying Roman officer sat up and raised his arms. Micah later swore that Jesus had cut his ropes in the dark cellar, even though no one saw him do it. However the soldier got free, he opened his eyes and stared at Jesus, transfixed.

"I am ready," he croaked. Even though he was tongueless, the words were clear. The assassins were amazed and always insisted on this detail afterward.

Jesus placed his hand on the prisoner's head. "The Father's mercy be on you," he said in a low voice.

Tears streamed down the prisoner's face. "What Father?" he asked.

"The one who sent you here and now brings you home."

Jesus put the knife in the prisoner's hands, gently so that the blade wouldn't cut him. He placed it with the hilt upward. For all the world it looked like one of the crosses that the Romans tied condemned Jewish rebels to when they wanted to make a public display of their deaths. The prisoner, who had seen more than his share of crucifixions, stared blankly at the knife.

"Why?" he mumbled.

"Because the tormented and the tormentor are equal in God's eyes," said Jesus. The words weren't his. They came through him, and like the prisoner he shuddered at the cross made by the knife.

In his half-crazed state, the prisoner thought he was being offered the noble way out. His hands trembled as he turned the point toward his heart. The Zealots remained frozen in place, waiting for the suicide to come.

"No," said Jesus, pulling the weapon away from the prisoner's chest. "You are called."

He held up his hand, and the prisoner gave a loud gasp that rattled in his throat. He slumped over; the knife fell from his hand, clattering on the floor.

"There," Jesus said. "It is done."

No one opposed him as he walked over to Mary and took her by the hand. They headed toward the narrow staircase that led back to the inn. Judas blocked the way.

"You send a Roman to Heaven?" he shouted. "You're no messiah. You're a madman."

Suddenly the three Zealots came to life. "Messiah?" Micah echoed. He stared at Judas. Maybe he had two madmen on his hands.

Jesus shook his head. "God has shown mercy to someone you condemned. That leaves you with a terrible possibility. Maybe the messiah has come, but he's here to save Romans too."

The words were blasphemous, stunning the Zealots. For a quick moment they couldn't move. Jesus pushed Judas aside. Holding Mary's hand, he led her upstairs. The noise of drunken revels could be heard overhead. They almost crashed into a wine cask at the top of the stairs and the next moment were gone.

PART THREE

MESSIAH

12

PURE IN SPIRIT

As they reentered the raucous inn, Jesus could sense Mary's shock at the prisoner's death. She trembled at the prospect of being set upon before they could make an escape.

"No one saw us go downstairs," Jesus said, keeping his voice calm and level. "We have to leave by the front. Just put one foot in front of the other, slowly." He held on to Mary's arm. "The Zealots can't run after us. They know what will happen if they get caught with a dead Roman."

Heads turned as the two walked through the dark, smoke-filled outer room. Smoke fumed out from a corner fireplace where haunches of goat meat were roasting. The greasy haze made the drunkards' faces look sinister.

But nobody lifted a hand to stop them, and a moment later they were outside. The bright sunlight didn't come as a relief to Mary—she almost doubled over from the quaking in her abdomen. Across the lane Jesus saw a wide doorway floored with paving stone instead of dirt, a sign that a well-off merchant lived there. He led Mary over to it, and she collapsed.

For a long time there was nothing to do but hold her. They attracted little attention—people were used to small scenes of misery on the streets. When he thought she had calmed down, Jesus said gently, "Have you ever seen anyone die before?"

Mary shook her head. "Not like that." She drew in a ragged breath.

Jesus looked away. Tending to her had given him a few moments in which he could forget himself. Now he felt a rush

of hopelessness. In his mind he had been following God's will. But God didn't run, and that was all he had been doing since that first night he entered the Zealots' cave.

"I feel lost," Jesus muttered. "God's mercy went to a Gentile who hates and persecutes the Jews. But I've been shown no mercy, so what does that make me?"

"Don't." Mary embraced him more desperately. "Doubt will destroy us both."

Jesus remembered the knife blade gripped in the dying Roman soldier's hands and the uncanny way it resembled a cross. It wasn't failure that was causing his despair, but a premonition of something unthinkable. An act no loving father would permit.

Suddenly Mary's embrace felt suffocating. Whatever trials God had in mind for him, Jesus had to face them alone. He freed himself from her arms and stood up. "You're not safe with me. I'm going to find a way for you to get back to Jerusalem."

Mary could have pleaded for him not to abandon her. She knew very well that her part so far had been to weep and run away. The thought shamed her and made her feel exhausted. She pulled her head cloth over her face. Curious passersby were beginning to take notice. Jesus crouched back down and faced her. "I've brought you nothing except disaster. We should still have faith. What else can save us?"

Mary had one answer left, a secret one she had been suppressing too long. She lifted her head, her eyes burning into Jesus's, and she began to kiss him. His surprise and the force of her passion pushed him back, almost knocking him off balance.

"Love me," she pleaded, her words hardly distinguishable from a moan. She pressed her lips to his again.

Jesus felt the rush of arousal. He had never kissed a woman this way in his life. He didn't pull back. There was nothing more to lose; he couldn't posture as being too holy

and pure. He felt Mary waiting. She wasn't so lost in passion that her instincts were gone. She would know in the next instant whether she had any hope with Jesus as a lover. Faith was nothing if not faith in him.

We make a mistake about God when we think that his infinity is somehow larger than the universe. Infinity is larger than the largest, but also smaller than the smallest. Divine intervention can happen in a split second, inserting itself between one breath and the next. Between a kiss and a response.

The arousal rising in Jesus's body reached his heart, where it did something unexpected—it turned from passion into light. His heart became filled with a white radiance. It didn't extinguish his love for Mary. It exploded instead, smashing all boundaries. Jesus felt overwhelmed by a wave of bliss that enveloped everything around him. Mary gasped, and he knew that the same mystery engulfed her.

You are my most beloved.

The words came from the same source that drew him into the burning house. This time it enveloped them both. Jesus felt immense relief. The law of Moses commands every man to marry. He had suffered over this, but now he saw that he would fulfill the law in a different way, by marrying through God.

Jesus looked into Mary's eyes. Had she heard the words? Had she felt light filling her body, dissolving it, as if the body suddenly became spirit? Mary's gaze melted, losing every trace of despair. She pulled back and would have spoken, but another event intervened.

A man's shadow fell over them. It was felt before it was seen, a coolness that shielded the sun. At that moment Jesus was torn. He wanted to cling to Mary in their shared bliss, a spell he would have sacrificed anything to keep from breaking. But the man's shadow meant something fateful. Jesus knew it instantly. The stranger spoke, his face still silhouetted against the sunlight.

“Master.”

Jesus thought of the first person who had ever called him that. Had Querulus managed to find him? He let go of Mary, who remained crouching in the doorway, and began to rise. The stranger bent down to help him to his feet, and now Jesus could see that the face was darker and thicker than the aristocratic old Roman's.

This didn't prevent Jesus from giving the same reply he gave to Querulus that first night. “I am no one's master,” he mumbled.

“Or everyone's.”

The man, once he could be viewed closely, was a Jew dressed in the same kind of white cloak that Querulus had given Jesus. He was sober in tone, almost solemn, with eyes that could not tear themselves away from Jesus.

“You are above anything I can understand, yet you are everything I've ever wanted. I can't imagine it.” The stranger sounded abashed and hesitant, as if he had practiced this speech a hundred times, only to find that it didn't remotely fit the moment. Jesus drew back, and the stranger quickly added, “I know I haven't made a mistake. Come.”

Jesus allowed himself to be helped up, but he pushed away the stranger's hands, which were large and rough, as they reached out for his. Before he could turn back to Mary, the stranger lifted her up too. She had gone limp, and it was like lifting a deadweight.

“Why should I come with you?” Jesus was certain that one of the watchers had come out of the shadows to find him, as Querulus predicted would happen.

The stranger replied, “I am a messenger sent to you, but you are a messenger sent to the world. Have you heard of us?”

“Yes.”

“Then you know that we've been aware of you for a long time.”

“How?” Jesus’s tone was wary.

“First by signs and divinations. The stars told us part of the story; so did the prophets. God told us the rest.”

“You shouldn’t trust in signs, and the prophets spoke hundreds of years ago.”

“I know.” The reticence of Jesus’s replies didn’t stop the stranger, whose emotions, once released, kept rising. “It’s beyond anything I could imagine that I’ve found you. I came alone, but my whole community has prayed for this moment.”

“I’m sorry. You’ve deluded yourself.”

The stranger stepped back, startled. “You can’t mean that.”

“Why not? Do you think you’re the only Jew who hasn’t found the messiah?” The last trace of bliss had gone; there was no radiance left in his heart. “I know what it means to be deluded.”

Mary had recovered enough to feel embarrassment at the intimate scene the stranger had intruded upon. She smoothed her robe and tried to comb out the tangles in her hair with her fingers. “Let’s go,” she whispered to Jesus.

The stranger overheard her. “No, you mustn’t.”

He blocked the way, his eyes anxiously searching Jesus’s face. “Don’t you understand, you of all people? Yours isn’t the path of joy. ‘He was despised and forsaken of men. A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.’”

All three of them knew the words of Isaiah the prophet. Jesus resisted their meaning. “Being despised doesn’t make me chosen. Let us pass.” He waited. He wouldn’t push the stranger aside, not for a few more seconds.

Biting his lip, the stranger held his ground. “I never expected it to be like this,” he muttered, searching for words of persuasion that didn’t come. He had no choice but to let them pass. Jesus took Mary’s hand to reassure her; they stepped back into the street.

They had only walked a few yards when the stranger's voice reached them again. "You're afraid to die. Just like the rest of us."

Jesus turned his head, his gaze steady. "Yes."

"So afraid that you'd condemn the rest of us to death? So afraid that you'd make all our prophets into liars?"

Mary felt Jesus hesitate; she tightened her grip on his arm. "Don't listen. We can't go back."

Jesus tried to obey her. He kept walking, but the watcher's taunts dogged them.

"Should Jerusalem crumble because you tremble? Tell me. The others will want to know. Show us what fools we were to believe. Would that satisfy you?"

The stranger kept pace behind them, shouting. Then Jesus felt Mary let go of his hand. "You believe him?"

Jesus glanced at her. Without her speaking, her eyes said, *You're already gone. We both know it.*

Jesus reached out to find her hand again, but he was too late. Mary ran. She gathered up the bottom of her cloak so that it wouldn't slow her down. Her bare legs made her look like a pale gazelle in the desert fleeing a prowling lion. Behind him the stranger kept silent, watching until Mary disappeared around a narrow, winding corner. He had coaxed and goaded Jesus into his net, but for the moment his hold was so fragile it might break at the touch.

THE MESSENGER'S NAME, it turned out, was Tobias. He brought two mounts with him, a good strong horse with a saddle and a donkey tethered behind it loaded with bags of food and various goods—apparently the stranger sold these along his route.

"I wandered a long time to find you," he said. "I had to support myself."

Jesus was given his choice of beast to ride. He had never seen a Jew on horseback, only Romans, much less did he know what to do in the saddle. He climbed on the back of the donkey, straddling the bags on either side. On the road the sight of the two companions made other travelers smile—one man erect on a groomed and muscled horse, the other hunched on a swaybacked donkey that drifted to the side of the road whenever it spotted a promising tuft of new spring grass.

Neither spoke. They were lost in different moods of silence. Jesus's thoughts kept returning to Mary and the sensation of her hand jerking away from his. Tobias couldn't wrap his mind around the idea that age-old prophecies had come true. As they sat around the fire on the first night, Jesus broke the silence.

"Is the messiah a man?" he asked, staring into the flames. "Or can he disobey the law without being punished?"

"What?" Tobias couldn't have been more startled.

"If he is a man," said Jesus, "he must marry. That's the law of our fathers. But what if God won't let him?"

Tobias was at a loss to reply. Jesus spoke low and turned his gaze on his companion. "What do you say? Have the watchers learned anything in all their years of praying?"

Tobias hesitated. "What the messiah says and does can only be known by him."

"So he isn't a man. I have never satisfied a woman. They're a mystery to me. I'm a mystery to myself. Is that what your people want, someone more confused than they are?"

Tobias jumped to his feet, looking afraid. "How can you ask me such things?"

"I don't really know."

Jesus said these words simply, but they made the watcher more nervous. He paced back and forth, the flickering fire turning him into a phantom of glowing orange that rippled with black shadows. "It's not fair to test me this way."

“Why not? You said you were certain you hadn’t made a mistake.”

“I am.”

Jesus laughed. “You don’t look like it. Sit down. Go ahead. I understand now.”

It took some coaxing before Tobias would consent to return to the log that they had pulled up to the fire. He didn’t want to talk; instead, he busied himself scraping the crockery plates, wiping them clean with a scrap of cloth, and stuffing them back into a saddlebag. After the fire had been banked and the two were rolled up in their sleeping blankets, Tobias asked, “What do you understand?”

“You don’t want a messiah. You want an idol.”

“That’s not true.” Tobias responded a touch too quickly. He knew the law prohibiting idols, had known it since he was four or five years old.

Jesus ignored his protest. “An idol can be worshiped on a shelf. It makes no trouble. It never has doubts, so you can trap God in the cage of your own fantasies. What could be better?”

Tobias rolled himself up tighter in his blanket and gave a muffled reply.

“What’s that?” Jesus asked.

Tobias poked his head out. “I said I’m taking you back to the others. That’s my mission. I don’t have to understand you.”

“I don’t think you can avoid trying to understand me.”

“We’ll see.”

Tobias satisfied himself with this clipped rebuttal; he stuck his head back into the wool cocoon. The next morning he acted sullen, rattling the pots and pans and breaking an eating bowl. He had little more to say when they were on the road again.

Jesus was unsettled too. He had made a glancing reference to Mary, genuinely wondering what Tobias thought. What

were his duties as a man now that God had changed everything? Maybe those who had spent their lives praying for the messiah knew more about him than he did himself.

The terrain remained barren, rising into brown hills covered with withered grass. So it came as a surprise, on the following day, when the horse and donkey came over a rise and down below was spread a patchwork of green gardens. In the glaring sun their green was like an emerald flashing in the mud. The gardens were empty, and Jesus asked where Tobias's people were.

“We bathe before the noon meal and pray until two hours before sunset,” Tobias had fallen into the habit of providing nothing but short, factual answers. As they wended down the switchbacks that led to the oasis, Jesus recognized that the sect he was about to meet could be no other than the Essenes. They were recluses, reputed to be the most secret sect in Judea. In Galilee Essenes were unknown. They could just as well be mythical. Where they lived, around the Dead Sea, the Essenes inhabited caves and hillside enclaves, rarely going to Jerusalem, even for High Holy Days.

The sight of home made Tobias sit taller in the saddle. “They’ll know we’re coming.” Like the Zealots, the Essenes kept watch, and Jesus heard sharp whistling tones that were not quail or pheasants or any other bird. Were the Essenes as suspicious as the Zealots? As angry? The more pressing question was what would happen when Jesus appeared among them. Tobias answered before he could ask.

“A banquet is prepared before you.”

“Doesn’t that take time? We just came over the rise,” said Jesus.

“What kind of watchers would we be if we had to use our eyes?” The Essenes had learned to be confident, if nothing else. At the first sight of home, Tobias seemed to lose his doubts about the prize he was bringing to his people.

As they approached the green gardens, figures began to appear. Scattered houses, made of finer stone and mortar than the mud dwellings of the villages they had passed, were concealed in the shade of a thick stand of pines. At first the Essenes looked ghostly, stepping into the sun in gleaming white robes, the same garment worn by men, women, and children.

“I had a robe like that,” Jesus said.

“We know. It connected you to us. You’ll have a new one after you bathe and rest.” Tobias was as much the focus of attention as Jesus. The way he sat, erect and proud, signified that he had succeeded in his mission. To capture the messiah was like capturing an eagle with one’s bare hands. People stared at Jesus with tears in their eyes. They would have shouted hallelujahs, Jesus thought, except that some ingrained sense of dignity prevented it. Mothers covered the faces of their youngest children with their skirts to keep excited cries from insulting their guest.

The trail ended at a large meeting house or synagogue. In front a line of elders waited, all of them with gray or even white beards. Before Jesus could dismount, each walked up and touched his feet. The last supplicant was the very oldest, who murmured, “May you never leave us.”

Amen.

A hundred voices prayed this last word in unison, making a soft, unearthly hum in the air. Jesus turned around and saw the whole community standing behind him. Who were they? He didn’t know yet, but they weren’t like the others, the villagers who grew hysterical when they knew who he was, grabbing at him like carrion birds to tear off their scrap of flesh. The Essenes were all but silent, their heads half bowed.

Be glorified.

The new words also filled the air with an unearthly hum. Did they come from the Essenes or from above? Tobias led him into the gathering hall—the elders parted to make way, a

sign of respect. As Jesus stepped inside, he saw a plain empty room with whitewashed walls and high windows. The interior felt like a synagogue, but there were no scrolls or altar. Except for low wooden benches arranged in rows, the entire space was devoted to paintings that filled the walls on all sides.

All the paintings were of him and his life, both past and future.

Tobias turned around, sensing that Jesus had stopped in his tracks. “Now you know why it wasn’t impossible to find you.”

Jesus barely heard what he said; his heart was pounding in his ears. He recognized scenes from his life in Nazareth: cutting stone with his father, sitting in a circle with his brothers and sisters while the rabbi read stories about the exodus from Egypt. But other images weren’t recognizable. He was painted sitting on a throne among the clouds and riding a donkey into Jerusalem while people laid palm fronds down in front of him.

No one had followed them inside. They wanted Jesus to view this spectacle privately, to react without being spied upon.

“Where did these come from?” Jesus sounded hoarse, but his face betrayed little reaction.

“No one knows,” Tobias replied. Jesus gave him a baffled stare. “The first one appeared when I was a child too small to remember it.” He pointed to a painting in the far corner. Jesus barely recognized Joseph and Mary, bundled in thick winter clothes. She was suckling a newborn baby, yet the surroundings didn’t look like the home Jesus knew. It was more like a barn or stable. Vague outlines of cattle and sheep appeared in the background. His parents had never spoken about such a place.

“You’re saying no human hand painted these?”

Tobias nodded. “Every winter on the shortest day of the year a new one appears. Our elders had a vision telling them to build this hall with bare white walls. Nothing else was

revealed. Because we are Essenes, we obeyed. We have no other purpose in life. For many years the purpose of this place was a secret. We were told to keep the hall sealed, until one day another vision came. And we found this.”

He pointed to one of the high windows, not to a painting. Jesus squinted against the sunbeams that poured through, flecked with luminous, dancing motes of dust. Just below the window some words could be made out in black Hebrew letters. *Light of the world.*

“The rest came very fast,” Tobias said. When Jesus looked around, each window had its own words. *Messiah. Anointed One. Lamb of God. King of Kings.* Every Jew knew them as tokens from the prophets.

“So you see, the signs and divinations weren’t hard to interpret. We’d have to be blind to miss them.” Tobias was smiling this whole time. He took a small measure of enjoyment in surprising Jesus.

Jesus approached the painting that showed Mary and Joseph in the stable; he brushed his fingers lightly over the hem of her coarse wool robe. It was true to life. She had worn it every winter of his life.

“Your people are pure in spirit,” said Jesus. “That’s why these have come to you.”

The pounding in his ears had ceased. Jesus swung his gaze around the hall, taking in every scene. One patch of wall was draped with a linen sheet, hiding the image behind it. “Why is that one covered up?”

Tobias shrugged. “It’s the last one to appear. We came into the hall as always, on the shortest day of the year. But this time was different. The image didn’t show the messiah.”

“Who did it show? I want to see.”

“Of course.”

With some hesitation Tobias went over and tugged at the sheet, which fell from its hooks.

“We couldn’t understand,” he said. “It’s not even finished.”

The painting captured only a barren low hill under an overcast sky. It could have been any hill in Judea, and there was no reason it belonged among the other paintings. The invisible hand that made it had stopped short, although when Jesus walked closer, he could make out, just barely, the faint outline of something. Three crosses stood on the brow of the hill, barely sketched in.

“Were we right to cover it up?” asked Tobias.

Jesus’s face had become pale. “Leave it exposed. I know why it’s this way.”

“Why?”

“It was left for me to finish.”

13

TRAVELER

On the day Jesus announced that he was leaving, the word spread like wildfire. The Essenes had awaited his departure for five years. His purpose wasn't to stay. Wasn't it written that the savior would conquer Jerusalem and enter the Temple in triumph? It was also the day the Essenes would be personally vindicated. No one in the outside world cared about them. While every Jew prayed for the messiah, the Essenes were too extreme. They were so pure that they never married. They practiced celibacy to atone for the disobedience of Adam and Eve, and newcomers had to serve the sect for ten years before being accepted into the group.

Now at last the Essenes would be rewarded. In their minds, God knew every detail of their enormous sacrifice.

“We'll march to the Temple behind you,” Tobias declared. “We're not fighters. We don't have weapons, but that won't matter, will it?” He envisioned Roman soldiers falling like rows of wheat in a field when Jesus raised his hand.

Jesus shook his head and said that he would go alone.

Tobias was concerned. “I know you won't fail,” he stuttered. But no army at all? The messiah had been prophesied as a warrior. What else could he be? Violence was woven into the scriptures like a bloody thread, beginning with God's curse of the serpent and the mark of Cain in the book of Genesis. On down through the history of the Israelites, between God's punishments and the constant battles for survival, the world was filled with violence.

“Can I, at least, go with you?” Tobias asked.

“You’re curious to see me bring down the Roman fortifications. By blowing the *shofar*, maybe?”

Tobias looked hopeful. “We have one. You can take it.” Ever since the ram’s horn brought victory at Jericho, centuries before, a shofar had been part of the High Holy Days.

Jesus put his hand on Tobias’s shoulder. “You can come. Of everyone here, you deserve to. But I seek what cannot be sought. And when I find it, you will not see what it is. The wind is more visible.”

Tobias smiled. “But one can feel the wind and go where it wants you to go.”

Preparations happened quickly and with great excitement. A pack donkey was loaded and hitched to the back of a wagon. Jesus refused anything more elaborate, and when the elders hinted at some hidden caches of knives and armor, Jesus ignored them. Runners went higher into the hills to gather the other scattered Essenes who lived outside the center at Qumran. As they gathered at the high plateau where Qumran sat, a mile from the Dead Sea, the arrivals looked strangely pale for a desert people. But, then, many of the older men devoted their days to copying scripture, bent over candlelit tables in dark houses and caves. Even after half a day’s journey they blinked in the sun like ruffled owls.

Jesus watched all things with an aloofness no one could explain. He came to the feast given in his honor, but he sat at the head table barely sipping a goblet of wine and absent-mindedly tearing at his bread. The next day he gathered as many in the assembly hall as could fit, filling the benches and crowding every square inch of the floor. It was noon in high summer; the air was barely breathable. He knew almost every face. Hadn’t he lived among the Essenes for five years now? He had taught in every community, feasted with the rabbis, and argued the smallest scrap of the law and the *midrash*.

Jesus told them that the real scriptures were not in the scrolls of the Torah. “If God is everywhere, we must figure out why he’s so hard to see,” he once said when somebody found

him crouched in a field studying something intently on the ground. It turned out to be a lark's nest hidden in the grass. A clutch of eggs had just hatched, and the blind fledglings in the nest mistook Jesus's shadow for the return of their mother. They opened their huge pink beaks, crying and weaving their heads for food.

Such somber moments were rare. Jesus brought more joy to the Essenes than they had ever known. He shocked the rabbis by declaring that God's creation was as pure as the day Eden appeared. For him, the Fall didn't exist. "Look at the birds of the air and the lilies of the field," he said. "Can you name a commandment that they break?" He taught that innocence was closeness to God and that all creatures were created innocent.

"Eve angered God, and our innocence was taken away," the rabbis insisted.

Jesus smiled. "Women have mysterious powers, but I doubt they could destroy what God created. We have only fallen in the mud, and mud can be washed off."

The rabbis weren't convinced; no one has the right to contradict the Torah. But ordinary people believed him and loved his teachings. On the outside Jesus was recognizably the same young man who first appeared in their midst, but God had worked tremendous changes inside, had fashioned a pillar of strength from a green sapling.

Now Jesus cast his eyes over the gathering, waiting for silence before he said, "Have I disappointed you? I must have. Otherwise, it is God who has failed, and that is impossible."

A confused buzz arose from the crowd. No one expected the talk to begin like this.

"I hear no reply," said Jesus. "If I have satisfied you, then you are all saved, right? The Jews are fulfilled. Is that what you want me to believe?"

Was this a test? Confusion spread; there were troubled outcries. "Master, tell us what you mean."

Jesus held his hand up for silence. “You want me to vanquish your enemies and return the land to God. I can’t do anything until you answer me one question. Why do you need me? Why are you not saved already? Someone speak.”

Tobias, sitting in the front row, felt his heart pounding. He would have jumped to his feet, but one of the elders stood up nearby.

The old man spoke haltingly, trying to hide his distress. “Master, the Jews cannot save themselves. The Romans hold our land by force; they tax us until we are beggared. Thousands of rebels have died, and their families have been murdered in retribution. You know all this.”

Jesus nodded. “God knows all this too. So why has he stood by and done nothing?”

The elder cleared his throat. He had learned submission to the wisdom of their young master, but it was another thing to be quizzed like a dull schoolboy.

“God has waited until we atoned for our sins,” he said. He swept his arm across the whole congregation. “Everyone here has joined in one great act of atonement. All our years of purity serve that end, to earn God’s mercy.”

Jesus frowned. “It doesn’t seem that you’ve earned much mercy. What do you really have? Spinach mixed with dirt to eat, a few scrawny sheep half starved on desert scrub. Many sinners have been given more.”

The crowd was stunned. The last thing they ever expected was to hear Jesus treat them with contempt. Yet whatever they heard, Jesus wasn’t being scornful. Until a month ago he blended in with the Essenes. But one night, when he was walking late among the olive groves, something happened. It seemed like nothing at first. He looked up at the moon through the tangled branches of the oldest tree in the grove. The branches looked like a net, and the moon was a bright fish caught in it, ready to be dragged to shore.

Suddenly Jesus felt a pang in his heart. He kept staring; the image grew ominous, because he knew that the Essenes would fail. Their purity wouldn't save them. Like the moon, they were trapped. No tiny sect could atone for the past. Generations would pass, and the Jews would remain slaves. Their only hope was still a secret.

Jesus knew two things at that moment. He must leave to find the secret, and he could not allow the Essenes to follow him in case he failed.

He steeled himself against the dismay of his listeners. "God sees everything. Arrogance is hidden in meekness, and pride in purity," he said. "You are misguided to believe that you could totally cleanse yourselves, and the worst mistake you made was to believe that I can save Israel." Jesus ignored the waves of shock that were now turning into ones of anger. "I came as your friend," he said, raising his voice. "And I will not leave as your enemy. But if you expect me to shout down the walls of Jerusalem like Joshua before Jericho, you are deluded."

The Essene men jumped to their feet shouting; the women began to wail. Tobias was among the few who kept his place, bowing his head and praying that the master had some secret meaning in mind.

Jesus interjected. "What, now you turn on me, so quickly? A few words of rebuke, and your love turns to hate?"

Standing by an altar table piled high with gold ornaments and exotic fruits, placed in reverence to him, Jesus cleared the table, sending the metal bracelets and amulets clattering to the floor. Then, he leaped on top and spread his arms, shouting to be heard above the din. "Sit down! Calm yourselves!"

Many were too riled to listen to him, but the women and the cooler heads among the men coaxed them to sit down again. Jesus spoke above the angry muttering and oaths.

"I am not leaving for myself, but for you," Jesus said. "All you've ever wanted from me is to save the Jews. The Jews

cannot be saved as long as the world is what it is. We need a new world, nothing less.”

No one understood his meaning, but mixed into these words was still a faint hope, and so the crowd became less tense. Someone exclaimed, “How will you bring a new world, master?”

“I don’t know. I only know that I cannot be what you imagined. I am no warrior against our oppressors.” Jesus lowered his head. His meek tone stirred the audience, even as upset as they were.

Tobias rose to his feet, unable to keep silent any longer. “Others broke the covenant, not us. We’ve tried with all our hearts to honor God. We’ve obeyed his commandments, repented of every sin, no matter how small.” There was a murmur of agreement in the hall.

Jesus replied slowly. “You are the purest people I’ve ever known. God loves you for it. But he will not save you for it.”

“What are you saying, that no amount of goodness can satisfy him?”

Jesus shook his head. “God is more than goodness. God is a mystery.”

“And you haven’t solved it?”

“Not yet. But I am closer than the day I arrived.”

The air was filled with a low moan. Tobias looked around. “You can’t leave us in despair. We took you as our teacher. Teach us.”

Jesus shook his head. “Let me go. Forget I was ever here.” He jumped down from the table and made his way to the door. Women started to wail again; men slumped with their heads in their hands. A day that began in celebration had been scraped down to bone.

Tobias caught up with Jesus. “Look at what you’re doing. Come back. We’ll be hopeless.”

“Be calm, Tobias. It’s no one’s fault.” Despite the turmoil he had created, Jesus seemed as composed as ever. “Bring the wagon around. We leave immediately.” Tobias set his jaw, refusing to budge. In a gentler voice Jesus said, “It’s for the best. God can speak and still cause tears. You know that well enough.”

If Tobias had a reaction, he turned away too fast for it to be seen. He walked into the pine grove where the animals rested in the shade, and a moment later he returned with the cart and the pack donkey. Jesus climbed into the back, where two lambs had been tossed in case they ran out of provisions. Tobias cracked a whip over the mule that drew the cart. As they pulled away, colored banners hung from the trees in anticipation of cheering the messiah on his way to Jerusalem.

The lambs bleated in distress, sensing that they were being torn from home. For some time, Jesus whispered soothingly to them, but he neither looked at nor spoke to Tobias. He didn’t want to reveal what it had cost him to make his brutal speech.

That night, exhausted with praying, the Essenes disbanded. Some were so spent that they spread blankets on the floor of the hall to sleep. Most gathered their things and headed back to their isolated homesites in the hills. The mood was forlorn. Night came and went. The next morning, when those who had slept in the hall woke up, they found that the paintings on the walls had disappeared, leaving the plaster as fresh and white as the day it was first applied.

AFTER LEAVING THE Essenes Jesus kept close to the river Jordan, which gave Tobias hope that he would enter Jerusalem after all, or at least turn homeward to Galilee. “Don’t you want to see your mother and say farewell?” he asked.

Without turning to look back, Jesus said curtly, “My mother knows where I am.”

The worst thing would be if Jesus was headed for the notorious Silk Road that ran from the Nile to the outer

darkness in the East. Since boyhood Tobias had heard about fantastic courtesans carried in a litter covered by cloth of gold, princesses turned to whores for the delectation of Roman emperors. Their camels wore silver bells, and the wafting of roses and ambergris could be smelled an hour before they arrived. Mile-long spice trains traveled the route, and the rainbow-hued silk, supposedly spit out by worms, felt like the softest lambskin sliced into layers you could see the moon through. The Silk Road led to oblivion.

But on the third day Tobias recognized the road to Syria instead, one of the most dangerous in Palestine for its smugglers and masked brigands. He had traveled it in his wandering, years ago, when he set out to find Jesus. Every mile had been a terror. Jesus was calm and never asked for news from the traders they encountered. Whenever they came to a crossroads, he silently nodded toward the fork he wanted. Now Damascus was only two days away.

That night at camp Tobias unburdened his heart. “You’re leaving our people behind,” he said, stirring the ashes dejectedly with a stick.

“That’s not the same as leaving God behind,” said Jesus. He considered for a moment. “Do you believe there’s one God for the Jews and another for everyone else?”

Tobias shook his head. “I know your teaching. There is only one God for all. But haven’t the Gentiles rejected him? They have put themselves outside the law. The Jews haven’t. That’s why we are the chosen people.”

Jesus didn’t reply. They’d had the same argument many times. Anyway, it wasn’t theology that had soured Tobias’s mood. The next morning Jesus took the reins from his hands. “You should go back. Unpack the donkey and ride it.”

“Alone? It’s not safe,” Tobias protested.

Jesus seemed determined. “You’ll soon run into the caravans heading south. Join them.” The unknown places that

lay beyond Damascus might as well be mapped in Hell for all that Tobias knew of them.

When he stubbornly climbed into the back of the wagon and hunched down on the straw-covered floor, Jesus said nothing at first.

“You shouldn’t have let those two lambs loose,” Tobias grumbled. “Somebody or something will eat them. Better it was us.”

An hour later they stopped beside a muddy spring to let the mule and donkey drink, and Jesus said, “I can protect your soul. I know it better than you do. But I can’t protect your body. You belong among the Jews. Bad as it is with the Romans, the Essenes have found a refuge.”

Tobias laughed with more than a trace of bitterness. “So you advise me to save my body and lose my soul? Is that your final teaching?”

This was Tobias’s backhanded way of refusing to leave Jesus. It was also the last thing he said before the robbers struck. There were six of them—probably a clan of impoverished Syrians who preyed on travelers as their only way to make a living—hiding in the thick brush watered by the muddy spring. They jumped out with fierce shrieks, brandishing long knives with rippled blades. Tobias had only one chance to save himself. He rose to his feet, shouting and waving his hands.

“Stop, stop!”

He reached into his sash to find the small money bag concealed in it, but the bandits mistook what he was doing. They thought he was reaching for a dagger. The youngest, an expert thrower, hurled a short spear crudely tipped with hammered iron. Tobias’s eyebrows flew up in surprise as the point pierced his throat. He gave one blood-muffled gargle and fell to the ground.

Tobias remained motionless, his eyes raised to the sky.

The Syrians shouted to each other in the local dialect. One knelt over Tobias's body and extracted the money purse. He looked mildly chagrined when he didn't find a weapon, but the tallest bandit, apparently his older brother, kicked at the corpse to show his disdain for remorse. He pressed his face close to Jesus's and screamed something unintelligible. When Jesus didn't answer, keeping his eyes fixed upward, the bandits laughed in derision.

The older one, who had kicked Tobias, reached for Jesus's sash to rip it away, hoping to find more money.

Jesus leveled his eyes at him. "No," he said softly.

The bandit looked quizzically at his arm, which began to tremble visibly. It wasn't paralyzed, but something else must have happened that only the bandit detected. He jumped back with a muttered oath. The other bandits grew quiet. After a pause, the older one turned on them and shouted angrily. An argument ensued, with much pointing at Jesus and waving of knives in his direction. Clearly the other bandits wanted to rob and kill him, and they were confounded that their leader, usually the most vicious one, refused to let them.

Jesus paid no attention. He knelt over Tobias and spoke to him. "Be glad this happened quickly. You would have been furious to think that no one will say Kaddish over you."

The place was too remote and desolate for any proper rituals; there wasn't even a tool to dig a grave with. Jesus took off his white cloak and covered Tobias's body, shielding it from the sun. But he didn't begin the prayers of lamentation demanded in the ritual of Kaddish.

"I release you from your earthly bonds," he whispered. "Go to my Father with joy."

Jesus didn't look over his shoulder. From the silence behind him, he knew that the bandits had left, using their furtive skills to make no sound. Whether they ran away or took up their old hiding places again didn't matter. Jesus held up his hand in blessing over the covered corpse. With the soul

gone, it was merely a husk. He glanced at the wagon and the mule and donkey, both skittish from the eruption of violence and the smell of blood in the air. They lingered by the water hole, flicking their ears to sense if more danger was coming.

Jesus walked over and undid their harnesses. He took the pack off the donkey's back and laid it on the ground. From this point on he would walk. He sat for a moment under a palm tree, drinking from the goatskin water bag that he and Tobias carried with them. At one point he smiled to himself. The mystery was leading him onward, and it seemed to operate purely on whim. You would think that the messiah knew the road ahead, but in fact his mind was completely blank. It was as if God wanted him to walk a path where there was no path.

When the sun was no longer at its burning zenith, Jesus swung the water bag over his shoulder and got up. He gave a farewell nod to Tobias and walked away. Another person might have been curious about the blood oozing through the white robe that covered the body. And not from morbid curiosity. It needed explaining why a man pierced through the throat should now be bleeding, hours after his death, from the palms of his hands, his forehead, and a deep gash on his right side. Jesus walked away without asking.

THE ENDLESS ROAD east flowed like a dry river filled with humanity. No one on it could figure out who Jesus was. He had no goods or camels, so he wasn't a merchant. He packed no tent like the nomads and didn't stop by the side of the road to pray like the monks. He carried no sacred relics like the pilgrims. Besides, pilgrims had a destination in mind. Jesus fell in with one, a Persian heading west who had to make a diversion away from the trunk road.

“What do you seek, brother?” the Persian asked.

“Myself,” said Jesus.

The Persian laughed. “How do you know you didn't leave that at home?”

“I don’t.”

They were walking through unusually beautiful terrain, a rippling green steppe that had broken out in glowing yellow wildflowers like sunlight fallen to earth. The Persian was also a trader in stones. “For building?” Jesus asked. “No,” the Persian told him. He unfolded a square of raw silk, showing Jesus the most brilliant lapis lazuli he had ever seen, more intensely blue than the Tyrian sea. There was only one place in the known world where such stones came from. The Persian pointed southeast, indicating a place very far away. His family had trekked back and forth for ten generations along the great route east and west, enriching themselves with nothing more than a handful of blue stones.

“I’m rich. I don’t need to trade anymore,” the Persian said, “but I’ve heard about the Great Mother in Ephesus who has a thousand breasts. I want to kneel before her.”

“Why?” asked Jesus.

“Because I don’t want to die before finding God.”

“How do you know you didn’t leave him at home?”

The Persian was amused and intrigued; he dismounted from his horse and walked beside Jesus for the rest of that day. His best guess was that this lone traveler must be a Jew, but Jesus didn’t say yes or no.

“If you won’t tell me that, at least tell me why you left,” the Persian insisted.

“It’s hard to explain. I am not walking away from anything; I am not walking toward anything. If God is everywhere, he cannot be lost nor can he be found. And yet I must travel.”

The Persian, who was far from stupid, said, “Either you have looked into this very deeply or you are a simpleton.”

Jesus smiled. “A simpleton would have wanted to play with one of your pretty blue stones. Where I come from, no

one can figure me out. I've been worshiped; I've been despised."

Without warning Jesus veered off the road, heading for a particularly brilliant patch of wildflowers. The Persian trader stopped, considering what to do. It was worth a few hours talk to while away the boredom of his journey (he knew from experience that this segment of the road, which lasted three months time, was only a fraction of the whole, which went to the end of the world), but it wasn't worth being sucked into the delusions of a madman. Nonetheless, he waited.

After half an hour Jesus returned and resumed walking as if he hadn't detoured at all. The Persian said, "I know where you need to go." He enjoyed the surprised look on Jesus's face. "It will take several months," the Persian continued, "but when you reach the land of horses, where they roam free by the thousands, turn south. The world is a hunchback, and you will reach its hump by heading south. Start climbing. That's what you need to do."

"How do you know?" asked Jesus.

The Persian held up his hands. "It's not what you think. I'm no oracle. But you resemble others I've met. They are called the 'God-mad,' and they come from those mountains. You must climb so high that you can't breathe anymore. The snow will blind you until you think death is just another name for whiteness that never ends. Ordinary people go insane if they stay there too long, but a few become God-mad, which is a different thing." He shrugged his shoulders. "If you believe them."

An hour later the road forked, and the Persian took the side that led to the lapis mines. Jesus kept to the main route. Truth to tell, the stranger had bestowed a valuable clue: Jesus could be God-mad, if that meant consumed by the divine until all else was burned away.

For months an invisible hand had provided for Jesus's needs. When he was hungry, food appeared. Usually this happened as if by chance—he would come across an

abandoned camp where a loaf of bread had been inadvertently left behind, or a wild animal might drop part of a lamb it had killed in a ditch. Jesus ate the bread and roasted the lamb, thanking God as he did.

But God had stopped guiding him. Jesus no longer heard any words in his head, much less directions about where he should go. He sat in a glade of dark, fragrant cedars contemplating this change. He didn't feel abandoned or alone. Was God asking for something Jesus hadn't seen? No answer came, and so Jesus concluded that he must be following a mystery so deep that it had no voice. Something so inexpressible that even the burning bush that appeared to Moses would be too crude and gross. Still, he was grateful to get directions from the Persian. Perhaps it was time to hear God's voice in every voice. Or was that the maddest of all?

In a few days Jesus began to follow the nomads through the endless grasslands. In their hide-covered wagons, they were sailors on these green waves where shaggy wild ponies ran by the thousands. These nomads came from the east. Jesus never learned more than a few words of their nasal, sing-song tongue. They gestured for him to jump in the back of their wagon, where silent women and children nestled with the chickens and sheep. He gazed curiously at the women's round faces smeared with lanolin to make them shine. A mark of beauty, he supposed.

Only after several weeks did the roaming band encounter a village. When they did, the men suddenly became ferocious. They lit torches and ran shrieking toward the village. At first sight of them, the villagers ran without a fight. The nomad men looted everything they could lay their hands on—candles, jewelry, tallow, hides. The livestock they killed and butchered on the premises. With equal indifference they slaughtered any man or boy they found cowering in the surrounding grass.

Jesus was shocked. He said a silent blessing over the dead, whom the nomads stripped of ornaments and useful things like leather britches. They had no reason to bury the corpses; these were left among the intestines and other useless parts of the

slaughtered stock. Jesus watched as some men approached the wagon he was riding in. They hitched a weaned lamb and two calves to it, animals they could fatten along the way and butcher later. None of the men gave Jesus a second glance.

He wasn't afraid of them, despite their bloody hands, which had been wiped across their faces during the sweaty work of the day, leaving tracks of gore across mouths and foreheads. Only, why hadn't they killed him? The caravan started rolling. In the back of the wagon women crouching on straw mats as they picked through the pillaged spoils stared impassively at Jesus.

Then he understood. There was a circle of peace around him. He had nothing to lose anymore, which made him invisible. He was the wind inside the wind. How strange that God had worked such a change, invisibly and silently. If he wanted, Jesus knew he could wander the face of the earth in perpetual blessing.

Yet he couldn't. To be blessed in a cursed world would become unbearable. He knew that deep inside, and when the grasslands finally came to an end, Jesus left the caravan, taking a fine black horse that the nomads had presented to him, a parting gift. As the Persian had directed, Jesus turned south and came to the hump of the world. He began to climb, and when he reached the bleak terrain where vegetation shriveled to grass half an inch high, God quit providing food. Jesus kept on. Above the snow line even shriveled grass disappeared, and he plunged into the merciless whiteness that the Persian had predicted. The only sign from God to continue was that Jesus didn't freeze to death, despite the bone-chilling cold.

Finally, after another week of riding and walking, Jesus was stopped by an invisible fist in the form of a massive blizzard that descended at twilight. Jesus had been in the mountains for days, and if he wasn't insane or starved, he wasn't God-mad, either. The snow began to pile up in drifts, which built into dunes of snow blown by the howling wind. Jesus had no fire; there was no moon in the sky.

He released his horse, slapping its flanks until the animal trotted away, perhaps to survive on its own. The blinding whiteness of snow in the daytime turned suffocating and black at night. As the drifts mounted up to his chest, Jesus flailed his arms like a swimmer caught in heavy surf.

Soon this proved too exhausting. With no chance of escape, Jesus knelt and began to pray. By tucking his chin into his chest he kept the snowflakes from filling his nostrils.

Minutes turned into hours, or so it seemed. Eventually the weight of the snowpack buried him.

Which is how I found him, thanks to the temple lad who sighted an unusual hump in the snow the next morning.

14

THE WAGER

The story I've unfolded took four days for Jesus to relate. By that time he had learned to brew tea almost as well as I could. (He was considerate and brewed it weak after the second day.) In fact, he learned to do everything. There was little to it. Each meal was the same and entailed the same ritual. Pile chips of dried dung to build a fire in the stone hearth. Boil a pot of water from snow gathered at the doorstep. Once the water was hot, throw in strips of dried meat from the supply that hung from the rafters. Add a handful of millet (first picking out the weevils) and let the pot boil until the whole formed a sticky mass.

If measured by pots of sticky millet and jerky, Jesus's life story had taken twenty-three. I had listened without visible reaction while he talked; my eyes closed, but I never fell asleep.

We ate the twenty-third pot, and he stood up to fetch the tea, saying, "Has this taught you anything about me?"

I shrugged. "I knew all I needed to know before you began to talk. Has the journey taught *you* anything? That's the question."

Jesus smiled. "I learned strange things. At first I was a seeker, but whatever I found turned to dust in my mouth. Then God performed miracles through me, but I had nothing to do with them."

"And now?"

"Now I've vanished. I can barely find myself."

"Is that so bad?" I asked.

Jesus hesitated. “May I speak the truth? I thought God would exalt me.”

His look would have made some people laugh and others pity him. I said, “Exaltation comes when there’s nothing left of you for the world to grab. Be patient. God has already erased you. I see barely a smudge.”

I fiddled with a string of beads dangling from my neck, not looking up to see if Jesus was surprised. “The minute I set eyes on you, I thought of an animal common in these mountains, the snowshoe rabbit.”

Jesus laughed. “I’ve never seen one.”

“The snowshoe rabbit is brown in the summer when the snow has melted. It blends into the rocks and dirt so the foxes can hardly see it. Then it turns white in the winter when the blizzards come. But there’s a fox that can turn just as white, so the rabbit is still in danger, and the struggle continues.”

Jesus set the small iron teapot down between us. “I don’t understand.”

“You will.”

Suddenly I began swatting at the air like someone shooing away summer flies. Jesus asked what I was doing.

“Keeping the demons away,” I replied. “Use your eyes.”

Jesus couldn’t see what I was talking about at first. But if he squinted hard, he detected something on the edge of visibility: flitting shadows in the sunbeams that streamed in through the cracked window. “Do they torment you?” he asked.

“Just the opposite. They love me; they can’t stay away. Shoo!”

I tilted my head quizzically. “And you? Has God given you the gift of demons?”

“I never thought they were a gift. Do you know who Job is?” Jesus asked. I shook my head. “In the scriptures of my

people,” said Jesus, “God and the Devil made a wager. They found one man named Job who believed in God with his whole heart. He lived in complete righteousness in the land of Uz. The Devil wagered with God that he could turn anyone against God, even Job.”

“Ah,” I murmured. “And you consider this God benevolent? I won’t ask who won.”

“Because you already know?” said Jesus.

“No, because the wager is still on. Only this time they’re betting over you.”

Jesus regarded me sipping my tea. He had followed a mystery to the end, and the end was a miserable hut in a desolate rock field engulfed in snow. Who was I, anyway? It was easy enough to read his doubts.

I said, “It doesn’t matter who I am. You want God to win the wager, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Well, the odds are against him. In fact, the odds are zero. More tea?”

Jesus shook his head. “Why are they zero? Are the Jews cursed forever?” He thought about the mark of Cain and tried to put the image out of his mind.

“This Devil you speak of, what’s his name?”

“Satan. We know him as the Adversary.”

I gave a sharp nod. “That says it all. You want human suffering to end. You want a world based on purity and virtue. God has heard your prayers. He gave you miracles; he imparted strength and truth. So what’s stopping you? Not a curse. You ran into your adversary, someone who will keep pushing human beings in the opposite direction no matter how hard you push them toward God.”

I paused, giving the air a vigorous swipe; the swarm of flying imps was coming too close. “They know I’m talking

about them,” I explained. “Demons are eternal. This Satan won’t ever go away, and as long as he persists, the chances of God winning the wager are zero.”

“Why?”

“Because humans aren’t eternal. He has time to pick them off one by one.”

Jesus lowered his head. This old man had articulated what he most feared. “I had two people close to me, a man who was fierce to save the Jews and a woman who wanted to surrender herself in love for me. Was that Satan’s work?”

“Who else?” I said. “The man was jealous of you, the woman wanted to possess you. Demons have a way of blinding people to the light, even when it stands right in front of them.”

“She was closest to me,” Jesus murmured. “In her I saw mother and wife at the same time. I saw all women. How can that be wrong?”

“Then find a way to marry all women,” I said. “On your path that will be possible. When one woman’s love is the same as God’s love, you will know women as divine.”

I leaped to my feet. “Let’s see if we can track down one of those rabbits I told you about,” I said.

This baffled Jesus, but he raised no argument—he knew it was his role to submit to the mystery brought his way. For the moment I embodied the mystery and spoke with its voice.

We wrapped ourselves in animal skins and stepped out into a bitter cold. The day was clear as crystal, which made the snow glare painfully. Jesus looked down, his hand over his eyes, and followed my footprints as I led the way. We tramped through the new snow left by the blizzard until I suddenly stopped, holding a finger to my lips. “Ssh.”

I froze in place for a long minute, then crept forward, trying not to make crunching noises as my soles punched through the snow crust.

“There,” I said, pointing. “We’ve gotten very close to one, a big male. Do you see him?”

Jesus looked where I indicated, but the snowfields were so white that his eyes rebelled and began to swim with blue—their retinas were overloaded.

“I can’t see anything,” he said.

“Are you sure?”

Jesus strained, but the light’s intensity made it too painful to gaze for more than a few seconds. It amazed him that I could keep staring.

“All right,” I said. “Close your eyes. Let them rest. I don’t want to have to lead you home by the hand.”

Jesus crouched with his eyes shut, his hands over them. Gradually the blue glare faded away. He could feel me crouching beside him.

“This has been an excellent lesson,” I said with satisfaction.

“A lesson about what?”

“About you. You couldn’t see the rabbit because it was white on white. People can’t see you because you are God on God. The whole world shines with divine light, yet it so blinds everyone that they can’t spot God when he shows up in person.”

Jesus took his hand away from his eyes. “Don’t say that. No man can be God. Among my people saying that’s a sacrilege.”

The rebuke didn’t bother me; it made me laugh. “What are you saying? That God must bow to the rules of people who can’t even see him?”

“I thought you said they were blinded by seeing him everywhere.” Jesus felt the onset of a stabbing headache; he had taken his hand away from his eyes too soon.

I said, "I spoke the truth. People don't know that they see God everywhere. They think they see trees and hills and clouds. That's what blindness does. It hides reality behind a veil." I got to my feet. "You scared the rabbit away. Let's go home."

Jesus didn't protest. It would be a relief to get back to the hut; a place that was warm and dim might make his headache go away. But as we tramped back, his mind kept protesting about something.

He said, "You mustn't call me God anymore."

"All right. Soon I won't have to."

"Why is that?"

I turned to face him, my breath clouding in the frigid air and crystallizing as frost on my cheeks. "You're out to be greater than God. Admit it. There's no use hiding."

"What?" Jesus was genuinely shocked. "I'll listen to your lessons and try to figure out your riddles, but not if they're insane."

I ignored the objection. "You want to change the world. You said so yourself. God was content merely to create it. He doesn't interfere. So if you want to be the great meddler, you must want to be greater than God."

Jesus looked baffled. My logic made sense, and I certainly seemed satisfied with it. I hummed to myself the rest of the way back to the hut. Jesus had no choice but to follow. The blizzard had covered over any trace of a trail going downslope, and anyway, if he left now, he risked two things: never discovering how I made demons love me, and certain death from wandering aimlessly in the whiteness where the God-mad are born.

THAT NIGHT JESUS ate his bowl of sticky millet in silence. I, who love solitude much better than company, watched him without saying a word. I also knew that Jesus's mind was

worrying over the things that had been said. The hut was so cramped that the two of us had to sleep on the floor side by side, our shoulders almost touching. We lay on our backs staring at the ceiling, each aware that the other was awake.

Sometime well after midnight Jesus said, “Why did you come up here to live?”

“I had to. The alternative was suicide.” I was full of surprises, and I dropped this one matter-of-factly. “I even brought a knife in case I’d have to do the deed. It’s over there.” I indicated a cabinet in the corner. Jesus couldn’t see the gesture, because the room was pitch-black.

“Why suicide?” he asked.

“Because I was like Job and like you. I looked around, and the whole world seemed to be fighting a war between God and the demons. People staggered blindly between pleasure and pain. They cried out for God when God was everywhere. What’s the use of living in such a world if you can’t change it?”

“But you didn’t kill yourself.”

I chuckled in the dark. “No. That foolishness went away the first week. Being so damn cold, I thought killing myself would be a favor, and I was too miserable to do anyone a favor.”

Jesus turned his head in my direction. “Am I as strange as you?”

“You can’t guess?”

We both laughed. Then Jesus said, “So if you didn’t kill yourself, you must have changed the world.”

“Oh yes.”

“How?”

“The same way you’re going to. And it won’t take long to show you. How many years did you live with the Essenes,

five? You'll be able to change the world in five seconds, once you know the truth."

"Which is what?"

"The truth I am about to tell you," I said, "would mean nothing to an ordinary man. You don't realize it, but you are the rarest of the rare. You were born only to serve God, and yet that's not what makes you rare. Others have been born, many others, who only wanted to serve God. You, however, are like a feather poised on the edge. You don't need a shove. I can tip you over with a breath."

Jesus lay there on the hard floor, wrapped in thick goatskin, but still colder than he ever imagined he would be. The darkness was as profound as the darkness in a cave. His senses detected nothing except the low voice of an old man speaking close to his ear. Could this really be the setting for a revelation? He waited.

Before I could utter another word, the door flew open with a bang. Startled, Jesus half sat up. The moon was bright over the snowfields. In its eerie light a figure was outlined in the doorway.

"Don't be startled," I said. I was relaxed and confident. "It's to be expected."

"Who is it?" Jesus whispered. The figure didn't move or speak. It looked vaguely human, but there was little doubt that it wasn't.

"Your adversary is worried," I said. "He wants to stop me."

For an instant Jesus saw an image in his mind of a white rabbit pounced on by a white fox, the rabbit squirming helplessly in the fox's jaws until its neck cracked and it went limp. The next instant the doorway was empty, and the shadowy figure was in the room. A cloud passed over the moon. Now the only way to detect the intruder's presence was by the faint padding of his footsteps on the floor.

Should I be afraid? Jesus wondered.

I answered. "Not if you are who I think you are." I raised my voice. "You should listen too. You'll learn something."

In response there was a harsh growl close to where we lay; the room was filled with a fetid odor. A wave of cold terror struck Jesus in the chest.

His body trembled, but he felt my hand on his shoulder. "Steady. Ignore him, and listen. You already know that God is everywhere. But you haven't taken the next step, which is why you wandered the face of the earth until you found me. I am here to give you the knowledge that will provide the final release. If God is everywhere, he is in you. If he is in you, then you are everywhere. Do you understand?"

Jesus trembled as if struck by a terrible fit; my words had struck deep. He no longer heard me speaking. But someone did. The voice of God had been absent for many months. Now it returned again, only this time it was also Jesus's voice, the two so blended that they couldn't be told apart.

"You cannot change the world as long as you are a person. As one man, you will never escape the war between good and evil."

At this the intruder growled menacingly, and Jesus saw two eyes glowing red in the dark. But the threat was useless. The voice continued.

"Only someone who knows the reality beyond good and evil can know me. I am in all things, without division. This Satan wants you to believe that he rules a place where I am not. But even he is made of God."

The glowing red eyes darted closer, and when they were directly over Jesus, they shot fire. The voice went on, "The Adversary doesn't want anyone to know this, because it would destroy his power. He can hardly admit it to himself. If he is God, the war between us comes to an end, and he thrives on war."

Suddenly the intruder emitted a deafening shriek. The walls of the hut shook. Tears rolled down Jesus's cheeks. I

whispered close his ear. “The final stroke must come from you. It can never be taught, only discovered within. Keep listening.”

Jesus regained control with difficulty. The voice waited and then it said, “Only someone who can see the demons as part of God is free. Good and evil dissolve. The veil drops away, and all you see is divine light—inside, outside, everywhere. The sight of a rotting corpse becomes as blessed as a rainbow. There is no reality but the light, and you are that light. Your soul is the world’s soul. In your resurrection will be the resurrection of the world.”

The whole time it spoke, Jesus held his breath without knowing it. Now he released it in one long sigh. Mysteriously, as the air left his lungs it was replaced by a warm glow. The sensation was strange. His whole body seemed to deflate, but when he looked inside, Jesus saw what was really happening. Every experience he had ever had was leaving him. He saw a swarm of memories flowing out, like countless fluttering birds flying out of a tree at dawn.

I whispered again. “Let them all go. Lose yourself. It’s the only way you will ever find yourself.”

This opened the floodgates inside. Jesus saw the glowing red eyes move toward the door. Without knowing why, he sprang up to follow. I didn’t stop him. The eyes drifted away from the hut. Were they really Satan’s or merely some phantom’s? The next thing Jesus felt was a blast of frigid air over his naked body. He was running barefoot over the crusted snow, his heels punching deep as he ran. The snowfield was so white that it made the moonlight seem to come from below as much as above.

Let me see you.

Jesus willed his thought to catch up to the Adversary. The glowing eyes turned on him, and a shadowy body began to take shape. Jesus kept running, holding out his arms to embrace it. But the apparition disappeared, and his arms circled around smoke. Jesus bent over panting with exhaustion

and stitches of pain in his ribs. The eeriness of the moonlight made him feel as if he were floating in midair. Only the icy cold beneath his feet told him he was still on earth.

FOR SEVERAL DAYS Jesus lay in a state as still as death, but sweating with fever. When he opened his eyes again, he felt weak and drained.

“You inhaled the demon’s smoke,” I said calmly. “He couldn’t hurt you, but he could leave his stink.” I put a compress of herbs and packed snow against his forehead.

Jesus sat up weakly. “He doesn’t seem to love me the way your demons love you.”

“Not yet. Satan has more to lose than a small demon does. For a while he’ll avoid you. But eventually you’ll meet again.”

Once the fever was completely gone, Jesus had a hard time telling that anything had really changed. In fact, he felt hollow, as if God had left him, once again, to his own devices.

I went about my daily routine, and Jesus tried to join in. His heart was no longer in it, though; he felt restless. Remarkable things had happened in the small hut, he was sure of that. Why, then, did he feel bored and ready to leave?

“Once you solve the mystery, it’s all a bit flat,” I said. “I know the feeling.”

Jesus asked me to explain. We were sitting on the doorstep, feeling the feeble heat of the sun. Spring wasn’t far away. The vast snowfields were the same dazzling white, but a steady drip from the icicles hanging on the eaves told of new warmth.

“To know God, you must become God,” I explained. “People don’t want to hear that. It upsets their fantasy that God sits far away above the clouds. But being God doesn’t mean that you created the universe. God did that. He fashioned time out of eternity. He made the heavens and the earth from wisps of his mind. When I say that you’ve become God, I

mean that you know what you're made of." I smiled. "Luckily, I found out before I turned into this withered old stick."

It was the last talk we had on the subject, or almost the last. A few days later I packed some dried meat and millet into a leather bag.

"Here," I said when Jesus came in from washing himself in the snow. He nodded. There were no other preparations to make. Jesus could leave anytime he wanted, but I suggested that we share one last pot of twig tea.

I waved my hands over the teapot. This time I wasn't shooing away demons. "See this steam?" I said. "It doesn't look like the water in the pot, and nothing like the snow I gathered to melt. Nor does it look like a river or rainfall or the sea. But appearances are deceiving. Steam, ice, and water are all the same thing. To know that is to be free of ignorance."

Jesus understood, but he was troubled. "I still feel like myself. Why?"

I shrugged. "Who ever said that being God is a thrill?"

Jesus smiled. "Be serious."

"Who said God is serious? There's a universe to watch over. He has to laugh just to put up with us."

But I knew he craved an answer. I said, "Any piece of knowledge is limited. A fact, no matter how true, barely chips away at the vast field of ignorance. You came to me wanting to know the whole truth. And now you do, but your knowledge is young. Let it ripen. And no matter what happens, either everything is a miracle or nothing is."

At that moment the temple lad reappeared. The latest blizzard had half buried the village, he explained. He hadn't been able to make it through until now. "The priest and I prayed for you," he said, grateful that I was still alive. Even for that bleak region, the cold had been fierce.

"Why pray?" I smiled. "Were you afraid for my soul? I told you I forgot to bring one. It was too heavy to carry, and I

needed the room in my knapsack.”

The boy didn't like being teased. “If you died, I wanted you to go to Heaven. If you were alive, a few extra prayers couldn't hurt. That's what the priest said.”

I thanked him and pressed a small coin into his hand to cover the cost of incense. Then I told the temple lad to escort the stranger to the village and as far down the valley as it took to get to where the snow was gone and the trail became clear.

Without ceremony Jesus left. The temple lad had been confined indoors for days; now he couldn't help running ahead on the trail, which was no more than a rut in the snow. Jesus didn't bid farewell or look back at my hut. There was no chance that I would be standing on the threshold watching.

Jesus didn't suppose that the boy noticed, but when they were within sight of the village, he asked Jesus why he didn't tell the old man good-bye.

“I only say good-bye when I'm leaving,” said Jesus. “But I have no place to leave from and no place to go. I used to. Not anymore.”

The boy shrugged; he assumed that the stranger talked this way because of the thin air. Or maybe he had become God-mad. The priest had informed the boy that this phenomenon existed.

A few hours later they reached a cleft between the rocks that acted as a sun trap. The snow was melted there, exposing the trail cut out of the mountainside. The temple lad pointed. “Just go downhill. You won't get lost.”

Jesus nodded and thanked him. As he set off on his own, the boy watched him for a few minutes before the trail dipped out of sight. The stranger hadn't talked much on the way down. The temple lad asked his name, but the answer was nonsense. Alpha and Omega weren't proper names, and anyway, they were two names, not one.

15

LIGHT OF THE WORLD

After Jesus left my hut, there was nothing else I could do but watch from afar. Many versions exist of what became of him. I'll tell you what I saw.

A small party on horseback followed the Jordan as it wound like a speckled serpent through the desert. The two riders were making their way north from Jerusalem to Tiberias, the gaudy capital where Herod lived in powerless decadence. He wasn't so much a king as a royal puppet.

"Look, down there. What's going on?" the Roman said. He was a veteran horse soldier named Linus. He claimed to be descended from a line of senators, but in fact he was born in the gutters of Ostia, where the Tiber flows into the sea, carrying the port's sewage with it.

The Jew, who had been lagging in the heat of the day, caught up.

"Where?" he asked.

Linus pointed upstream to a crossing formed by a low spot in the streaked brown rock formations that lined the Jordan, a convenient place to ford cattle across.

Linus, who was lean and battle-hardened, scowled. "Is that trouble?" he asked.

His right hand, always ready for a fight, wore a leather gauntlet stitched with iron studs. Now the hand pointed at a group of local villagers who had gathered at the ford, but they weren't crossing, and they had no grazing stock with them.

“It’s not rebels. Not out here in the open,” the Jew replied. “Besides, half of them are women and children.”

The Jew, who happened to be Judas, smiled secretly to himself. Linus hated the fact that some worthless peasants were sleeping in his favorite willow grove. There were other groves along the river, but this one was where he liked to steal from Herod.

Once a month Linus and Judas were sent to carry treasure to Tiberias as Herod’s monthly tribute. Most of it came from money changers in the Temple, and Caiaphas ordered Judas to keep the treasure safe. But the Romans, ever suspicious, insisted on sending one of their own along as extra protection.

Judas had made this trip many times, and the ritual was always the same. When the ford came into view, Linus would yawn and announce that he wanted to take a nap in the willow grove. Judas would agree, then keep his eyes closed long enough for the Roman to snatch a handful of silver coins from the saddlebags. Caiaphas shrugged it off as a necessary expense, up to a point.

“Try to get him to split his take with you,” he said. “We’ll add it to next month’s shipment.”

But Judas cared little about such things. It had taken him the better part of five years to worm his way into the accounting functions of the Temple. In a perverse way it brought satisfaction that he, a rebel fugitive, should infiltrate so deeply. Most of his compatriots in Simon’s band had been killed in reprisal raids. He was certain the Zealots were doomed.

“Let’s go,” Judas said. “I see frogs crawling in the mud. Don’t you Romans believe that frogs come from Hell? Maybe the entrance is nearby.”

“Frogs?” said Linus. His eyes narrowed. “Why are you playing me?”

Then he noticed a group of villagers in the water. “Why are they bathing here?” he asked. “I thought you people had

places for that.”

“The mikvah,” Judas mumbled. “I don’t know.”

Judas knew more than he let on. He’d heard about this new practice of bathing out in the open—baptism. It had begun secretly in caves and cisterns in the hills, but lately had grown more brazen. “They do it for atonement, to wash away their sins,” he said.

“Why not simply pay a fine at the Temple like everybody else?” Linus grumbled. He threw up his hands. “Don’t explain. Nobody can understand the Jews, least of all a Jew.”

“True,” said Judas.

He waited for Linus to settle down before saying, “Why don’t you ride ahead? My horse is worn out. I’ll water him here.”

Linus was tempted. He could steal more loot if he were by himself. But he had a hunch that something political was going on. More and more Jews were washing away their sins in preparation for a mythical general who would lead an assault on Jerusalem. But what could one lone soldier (and a Jew who wasn’t as loyal as a barracks cat) do against twenty or thirty peasants, even if they weren’t concealing knives in their tunics?

“Are you sure you’ll be safe?” he asked.

“A Jew among Jews. I’ll be safer than if you came along.”

Linus jerked the reins, guiding his horse to make a wide circle around the baptism party. The one in charge, up to his waist in the river, looked like a wild man dressed in raw skins, his beard tangled and matted. He took a young boy by the nape of the neck and plunged his head under water. The boy came up spluttering and smiling.

“Filthy animals,” Linus muttered.

Judas was starting to dismount when he noticed that a man who had been sitting under the trees was heading toward him. His hair and beard were still dripping with Jordan water.

How long had it been? Time hardly mattered. Judas would have recognized Jesus in the dark.

“Don’t bother getting down,” said Jesus. “You ride. I’ll walk beside you.”

Judas sat back in the saddle. He glanced at the group who had been gathered around Jesus in the shade. They were all on their knees, bowing in his direction.

“I see that things worked out for you,” Judas said drily.

“And you escaped from your friends the assassins.”

Judas nodded. His black Roman horse headed off at a slow walk, raising lazy puffs of dust under its hoofs. Jesus kept pace with his hand resting lightly on the horse’s withers. There was no trace of recrimination in Jesus’s eyes. Not that Judas cared—it had been too long.

“Are you the one who baptizes them?”

“No, someone else,” replied Jesus. “My cousin. The people consider him holy. Some call him the messiah.”

Judas smirked. “A nice family business.”

Jesus kept his gaze lowered toward the dust. “We aren’t meeting by chance. It was necessary for me to talk to you.”

“Why? I’m no threat to you anymore,” snapped Judas, surprised at how much anger rose in his voice.

“I offered you salvation once. But you didn’t take it.” Jesus spoke easily, an old friend picking up a thread of conversation. “I know why you turned away. You were fighting a war inside. You still are.”

Judas’s body stiffened. “Don’t try that. Go back to the fools who believe in you.”

“How do you know that isn’t you?”

As gently as Jesus spoke, a rush of hostility gripped Judas’s chest. It came from a dark lair and penetrated his heart like a talon.

“Your war must end, Judas. There is no more time,” said Jesus. “You are being stalked by death. Accept me, and I will save you. But it must be now,” he urged.

Judas was speechless. The pain in his chest grew more intense. It could be a spell cast by Jesus to frighten him into submission. Or Linus. He might have slipped him a poisonous tincture so that he wouldn’t have to share his spoils anymore. The blood drained from Judas’s face; he slumped in the saddle, unable to move.

The next thing Judas knew, Jesus had reached up and touched his breastbone. The talon started to withdraw, and the pain gradually subsided.

“You don’t believe me,” said Jesus. “Look behind us.”

But when he turned around, all Judas saw was a swirling dust devil fifty yards away. It was a common sight in the desert, a small column dirtied with twigs and leaves, but harmless.

“That’s nothing,” Judas said. He knew that Jesus had powers. Raising the wind could be one of them.

“You don’t understand. This is where it becomes unsafe,” Jesus warned, keeping his gaze on the swirling plume. The wind picked up suddenly; the dust devil swelled and came closer.

Within seconds the wind became a gale, and Judas’s horse grew skittish. The storm was filling the animal’s eyes and nostrils with stinging grit. Jesus had to shout to be heard. “Listen to me, Judas. I love you, and you must accept me.”

The urgency of the words startled Judas, but an old contempt filled his throat. “Still dealing in mysteries? It’s just wind. It will pass.”

At that moment they heard a new sound—a horrifying screech coming from inside the dust devil. Panicked, Judas’s horse threw him. When he hit the ground, Judas was blinded by dust.

“Damn you!” he shouted. He made a wild swing for his horse’s reins, catching empty air instead. The animal had already disappeared into the opaque storm, like a magical horse vanished by a crafty magus.

By this time the dust devil towered thirty feet high. Jesus lifted Judas to his feet.

“Satan has no right to claim you,” he shouted in Judas’s ear. “Give your soul to God. Accept me.”

Even under threat of death Judas was defiant. He opened his mouth to say no when Jesus suddenly stood erect holding his arms out from his sides. Each hand began to glow, at first on a small spot in the center of the palm. It was like a candle shining through an oilskin lamp. All at once the spot turned white, and the next second a beam of light shot out.

Softly Jesus said, “I am the One. God has not forsaken you. Come.”

Judas fell with his face in the dust. He had heard the words clearly, despite the howling wind and the dust devil’s uncanny screech.

“I accept,” he moaned, and blacked out.

Jesus didn’t try to revive him. The dust devil had swelled in strength, enough to lift a horse off the ground. Jesus turned and walked directly toward it without so much as swaying. He stepped inside. It grew eerily calm at the center. Jesus looked around. Calmly he raised his hands. The light they emitted wavered and grew weaker.

“Put them out,” he called. “I dare you.” The light stopped wavering and glowed brighter.

The dust devil howled, and two red eyes appeared in the whirling chaos. Around them formed a dim silhouette that could have been almost human, just as when Jesus and the Adversary first met.

“Come on, do it,” Jesus repeated. “Isn’t that why you’re here, to put out the light of the world?”

But Satan couldn't, any more than he could knock Jesus to the ground. A mocking voice came from the shadowy silhouette. "I bow to you, master. I wish only to please."

"In what way can a demon please me?" Jesus asked.

Look over your shoulder.

Jesus did. Instead of seeing a thick haze of dust, the scene behind him had been transformed. It was as if he'd been lifted in the air on the back of an eagle, and the whole of Palestine was spread out below. He saw the Sea of Galilee sparkling like a blue sapphire in the sun, surrounded by green hills and fields.

It's yours.

Jesus shook his head. "What good to me is trash? I see nothing that's real."

He felt a wave of confusion from the dim, dusty figure.

"Do you still think you're real?" said Jesus. He held up his palms, and their light grew stronger. "What else can you give me?"

"I can show you how to make bread from stones. No one will starve again. You will feed the multitudes."

"What good is life when you steal a person's soul?" said Jesus.

Suddenly the scenery changed. Jesus found himself poised on the highest turret of the Temple in Jerusalem. The view down to the plaza was dizzying. Pilgrims and devotees wandered about like specks; none of them looked up.

I'll throw you down from this height, and you'll die. Is that real enough? Or do you expect God to save you?

"My Father wouldn't waste his time. If you threw me in front of a painting of a pack of lions, would I need saving?"

Jesus held up his hands again, and now the light shot out with so much force that Satan was hurled backward. The eerie quiet inside the storm broke into a deafening din.

“Give up your pride and arrogance,” Jesus cried. “Or the light of God will destroy you.”

The column of dust writhed furiously, like a serpent caught by the throat. Jesus closed his eyes and began to imagine the world. First he brought the village of Nazareth to mind, and as each house came into view, he filled it with white light from his hands.

“Let this light push away everything unreal,” he prayed. “Let Satan’s illusions dissolve.”

The mud walls and dirt yards of Nazareth started to glow from within. Jesus moved on to the surrounding hills, and as he envisioned their pine trees and olive groves, he filled them with light until they glowed.

What are you doing?

Jesus didn’t reply. The process in his mind was speeding up and widening in larger circles. He saw the entire region of Galilee and filled it with light. The old wager over Job’s soul was being nullified. Not by anything Jesus said or did. Not by any miracle to dazzle unbelievers. He had gone past all that. The ultimate secret was in his hands.

When a human being is nothing but pure light, unreality is shattered. Jesus was spreading the light everywhere, looking at everything in the world and substituting God for illusion. It took time, but he wanted to be thorough. By the end the Adversary was begging for mercy. The light had squeezed him into the last cramped corner of creation.

The job was finished. It had taken forty days and forty nights. Jesus got to his feet. The Adversary was greatly diminished, but it hadn’t given up.

This is only temporary. Men will remember me again.

Jesus shook his head. “The husks of men will remember you. But their souls are safe forever. The wager is won.”

Jesus knelt down by Satan’s shrunken form. “Don’t you wonder why I didn’t kill you?” Smiling, he said, “I’m saving

you for the day when you love me. It will come.”

The dust devil vanished with one last hiss. When Jesus turned around, he saw Judas’s motionless body lying on the ground where it had fallen. Despite everything that had happened, Jesus had returned to where he started. For forty days God had kept Judas alive, and when Jesus touched him lightly, Judas sat up. He had no awareness that more than a minute had passed.

“I’ve made you safe,” said Jesus. “You can follow me now.”

Judas blinked, looking baffled. “Who are you?” he said groggily.

“I am Jesus, your master.”

Judas shakily got to his feet. “Get away. I know no Jesus, and nobody can make me a slave.”

If he hadn’t been so bewildered, Judas would have struck out at Jesus. His fist was already curled up at his side. His eyes shone with menace.

And then Jesus understood. Satan couldn’t harm him, but he could mask the sight of everyone else and blot out their memories. One last trick of the illusionist. Jesus raised his hands to strip the veil away from Judas’s mind. Wobbly as he was, Judas put up his fists to ward off an attack.

Jesus hesitated. “It’s all right,” he said quietly. “If you follow me, it must be because you love me of your own free will.”

“Love you? Stranger, you must have lost your mind.”

Jesus put his hands down. “Go in peace,” he said. “That’s all I can do to end your war.”

Judas suddenly felt weak and lost. He heard behind him the noise of galloping hooves. Around the bend trotted Linus, leading Judas’s horse on a tether.

“Teach a Jew to ride,” the Roman said with scorn. “If this horse had gotten away, the stable sergeant would have taken it out of your hide.”

Judas nodded. He must have blacked out when his mount threw him. And the stranger who was weak in his wits? Judas turned around, but the road behind him was empty, and the silence of the woods hung in the still, warm air.

JACOB THE WEAVER was one of the best in Magdala, but when an old man marries a young bride, dignity flies out the window. He knew that people laughed at him behind his back. Jacob didn't care. In the autumn of life, God had brought him solace.

“Mary,” he called. He didn't have to speak loudly, just enough to be heard over the click-clack of the shuttle running across the loom.

His wife appeared, dusting flour from her hair. Her cheeks were smudged white; it was baking day.

“Can I trouble you, my dear? More indigo. I'm running short.”

Mary nodded. “I'll run to the dyer's.” Wiping her hands on a rag, she went to fetch her cloak.

Since she had returned to her home village, people found it hard to recognize her. She fell into silent moods, even in the middle of the public market. She covered her face beyond what was required of a married woman, and if a young man looked at her a certain way, Mary shot daggers back at him.

She usually begged off going alone to fetch yarn from the dyer's house, because Elias the dyer was handsome and unmarried. Jacob knew what the problem was. His young wife was more sensitive to gossip than he was.

“It's only natural,” he told her, grasping her hands in reassurance. “A lamb is more tender than a tough old ram.” Jacob's fingertips were calloused from years of running the

shuttle, and Mary shuddered at his touch. But that too was only natural, he thought. Her skin was too soft for his, which was like sandpaper.

Mary left quickly, taking a roundabout route. The dyer's house was only two streets away, but people looked out their windows, and because she had to fetch new yarn twice a week, their mocking eyes burned her as she passed. There was a back way that went through the animal pens that villagers kept behind their houses.

When she got to Elias's back door, her hand hesitated on the latch. In part she paused to inhale the rich scent of the dyes, especially the buttery spice of saffron, from which the dyer extracted a color like spun gold. But there was another reason, and it made her tremble.

Elias felt her presence in the dyeing room before he saw her. Mary came up behind him, very quietly. The air was steamy from the vats of boiled herbs and wildflowers—a village dyer couldn't afford mineral tints like lapis and cobalt. His blue came from indigo, and at that moment Elias was lifting a mass of freshly dyed yarn from the vat. As he swung it toward the drying racks, his torso, stripped naked to the waist, became streaked with purplish blue.

He saw her then. "You. Just a moment."

This was always the instant of humiliation for Mary. Prudery wasn't the cause. She'd been with enough men to erase any traces of that. But Elias made her wait before he embraced her. It wasn't enough that she was betraying her husband; she had to be shown, each and every time, that the dyer was the more desirable one, not her.

Turning around, Mary went alone to the bedroom. She took off her robe and shift and lay down on the low bed. It had a good mattress since the dyer had his choice of wool. He was sensual enough to fill the mattress with the finest lamb's wool. In moments of delight, when Mary was so aroused that she forgot her shame, she loved the soft feeling of it under her back and shoulders.

Elias stood in the doorway wiping his chest to get the stain off. Mary asked him why he was smiling.

“Usually it’s the man who’s afraid that rouge has gotten on him or the smell of perfume. But with us it’s you. How would you explain blue lips to your husband?”

Like many handsome young men, he knew his worth, but Elias wasn’t selfish. He showed a real need for Mary, and he took his time loving her. He kissed her breasts, and if he had time he even pulled out a well-worn copy of the Song of Songs and read poetry to her. Some of his tender gestures mattered to her when they happened; none of it mattered afterward.

As chance befell, Elias had missed wiping droplets of dye from his beard, and Mary got up with indigo on the side of her neck where he’d placed his head in the exertions of love. He noticed and wiped the stain away with his wet fingers.

“Look at me,” he said, wanting to make sure he’d gotten it all.

“I don’t want to.”

“Why not?” When Mary didn’t answer, pushing herself out of his arms to get dressed, Elias laughed softly. “Strange girl. You didn’t have to marry him in the first place. Living with a crab apple doesn’t make you lose your taste for ripe cherries.”

Suddenly there was a loud rap at the front door. Elias pulled aside the curtains. His face turned grim.

“Who is it?” Mary asked, immediately becoming as anxious as he looked.

“Four men. Run to the back. I’ll see you safely out.”

The men on the doorstep had seen the curtain part; they knocked more insistently. Elias didn’t stop to pull on his clothes. He pulled Mary by the hand to the back door and flung it open. But the town vigilantes weren’t acting on the spur of the moment. They had planned in advance, and four

more men, scowling and armed with sticks, stood in the back yard by the sheep pen.

Without a word they grabbed Mary and jerked her away from the house.

“No!” Elias shouted.

The four men didn’t bother with the naked lover. They dragged Mary away while Elias stood by the door. After a moment he shut it and went back inside.

There was no official wall for stoning criminals as there would have been in Jerusalem. The eight men had a place in mind, however, the side of an abandoned mill. They made a show of marching Mary down the street. She didn’t cry or hang her head, even as the townswomen joined the procession, screeching and shouting curses at her. Somebody ran for Jacob, the offended husband, but when he didn’t come, the mob grew impatient.

Each man had picked up a stone, and they would have assaulted her then and there. Mary couldn’t look at them; she sank down on the ground, numb and shivering.

“What are you doing, brothers?”

Heads turned, and Mary couldn’t help but look up. The sight of Jesus brought no flicker of recognition in her.

“We’re exacting justice,” an elder told the stranger.

“Why?”

“She was found committing adultery. Her sin was still warm on her flesh.” The elder eyed Jesus warily. It would be inconvenient if he turned out to be a Roman spy.

“The rabbi gave us permission,” someone shouted from the crowd, which was a lie, in hopes of making the stranger think twice.

“But the rabbi isn’t here,” Jesus pointed out. He kept his gaze on the men and away from Mary. “Why is that?”

When nobody answered, Jesus said, “Could it be because killing is also a sin? I am among Jews, aren’t I?”

“Go away. We’re in the right,” someone else called out.

“If you are, let me find you a bigger stone.” Jesus reached down and picked up a jagged rock twice as large as his hand. “As long as one of you is without sin, let him cast the first stone. He has nothing to fear from the Father. Our God only punishes the guilty.”

He held the rock up. “Well?”

The men glanced at each other nervously. Jesus dropped the stone from his hand; it clattered loudly on the pile that had been gathered for the execution.

“I will make a bargain with you,” Jesus said. He walked over and stooped down, taking Mary by the hand. He lifted her to her feet. “This woman will sin no more. If any of you see even the slightest blemish in her from this day on, I will come and lead the punishment.”

Shame had replaced much of the mob’s anger, but there were mutters now. “You can’t promise such a thing,” the elder declared.

“I promise it not only for her, but for all of you. Isn’t it written that someone will come to take away your sins? It may be time to believe it.”

The mob buzzed. “How can you claim to be the messiah?” the elder said suspiciously.

“What did you expect, a giant who comes down on a chariot of fire?” said Jesus. “So did I, once.”

Mary stared at him with the same bewilderment Judas had. She tried to pull away. Jesus whispered in her ear. “You wanted to possess me with your love. Don’t you remember?” She began to tremble.

“What are you to this whore?” the elder demanded. “She has a husband. She greatly offended him.”

“I am her soul’s husband, and I am never offended,” said Jesus.

Leading Mary through the crowd, Jesus looked right and left. “I bring good news from God, enough to fill the world. First I must take this woman to be purified.”

Mary was in a daze, aware only that they weren’t being followed. A few minutes later she passed Jacob the weaver’s house, which was shuttered and bolted. Jesus saw her eyeing it.

He said, “Leave that life behind. The Lord has prepared the way before me.”

This wasn’t enough to calm her heart, and soon they were away from the town. A stream ran by the side of the road; she could wash away the dust and tears from her face.

“And that last smudge of blue,” Jesus said, smiling.

Mary flushed with shame, but when she knelt by the water and splashed her face, more than dust and tears came away. Around her reflection shone a brilliance like the sun at noon, and Jesus’s hand was poised over her. With a gasp Mary whirled around. For the briefest second Jesus was haloed, and the next second the radiance disappeared.

Awestruck, she could barely whisper, “Who are you?”

“The one the world waits for. But I come to you first.”

“Why?”

“Because I know what will purify you of sin forever.”

You would have expected fresh tears to pour down Mary’s cheeks, from relief and gratitude, or if nothing else, the aftershock of fear. But Mary didn’t cry. In quiet wonder she said, “What have you done to me?”

“I have given you this day new life,” he said gently.

She would see him repeat the same blessing over and over, from that moment until the end came. A terrible end, but Mary

had no way to foresee that. It often fell to her to help dazed people to their feet after Jesus held his hand over them.

“What just happened?” they’d mumble, those that could find any words—most couldn’t.

“He killed who you were, so that who you are can be born.”

It was a good answer even though the disciples who spent hours memorizing what Jesus said overlooked it. But words hardly mattered. Jesus had opened a window on eternity, and Mary gazed out for the rest of her life.

THE NEWS OF the execution took days to reach Nazareth, so the village slept peacefully for a while longer. Passover week brought feasting that lasted half the night. Amazingly, Isaac the blind rose from his sickbed to attend. His youngest daughter, Abra, led him by the hand. He couldn’t see the decorations—silk satin, precious hangings and banners stored in cedar chests all year long, or groaning tables piled high with sweetmeats. But Isaac remembered them vividly from years ago.

“All this for the angel of death?” he said.

Abra was embarrassed. “God saved the Jews from the angel of death, and delivered us out of Egypt. You know that,” she said, looking the other guests apologetically. “You’ll excuse him, he’s old.”

“Don’t forget sick,” said Isaac cheerfully. “Old and sick.”

Abra celebrated too much at the feast and fell asleep in a chair before dawn. Isaac’s other daughters were already at home in bed. He thanked God for providing him the right moment to escape. Using his cane, Isaac crept outside and tapped his way until he reached the edge of town, where the fragrant pinewoods began.

The old man felt less secure here beyond the last house in the village. Which way did the Lord want him to go? A faint

breeze blew on his right cheek, a sign to turn left. Isaac thanked God again. He turned his steps, stumbling over stony ground and twice almost fell; he stopped and waited patiently for another word from God. None came, and then with the acuity of the blind he sensed someone close by.

“Jesus?” Isaac mumbled. His latest sickness had made him alarmingly frail and emaciated. He didn’t have the strength to go any farther.

Jesus’s voice said, “Here I am.”

“I dreamed of you last night,” said Isaac. He fumbled in the air to find where Jesus was.

“Better not to touch me,” Jesus said. “Not just yet.”

“Ah.” Isaac understood. His dream had showed him everything. The crown, the blood dripping down Jesus’s forehead. The crushing weight on his shoulders as the crowd jeered and mocked. When he woke up that morning, Isaac was trembling. It was all he could do not to betray himself with tears in front of Abra.

But Jesus didn’t sound sad, and so Isaac wouldn’t be either. “I told you, you have the gift. Maybe more than me. We’ll leave that for God to decide,” he said.

Isaac felt a puff of warm breath on his cheek. It brought the sweetest feeling, a child’s innocence blending with a mother’s bliss. Neither one by itself could really describe it.

Isaac couldn’t hold back his tears now. They flowed without shame. “Am I dying today also?”

“I don’t think that’s possible, unless I died. I didn’t,” said Jesus. “No one ever will again.”

Isaac gave a deep sigh. “That’s good.”

His limbs grew heavy, and he sank to the ground. The rocky ground felt soft as feathers. A new sensation filled his eyes. Was this what they called light? The only light he’d ever known was in dreams. This light was far more vibrant—it quivered with life. Isaac was dazzled by the light of day. He

looked up, and Jesus stood over him dressed in a white robe, his expression full of compassion. Isaac couldn't speak.

“God has opened your eyes to see a mystery,” Jesus said. “I have walked the earth as the son of man, and he is suffering at this minute. Disciples weep at the foot of the cross. Romans jeer and torture him.”

“So I've seen,” Isaac said. “It was horrible.”

Jesus shook his head. “It was no more than a dream to me. I don't come to you as the son of man, but the Son of God. Therefore, rejoice.”

Isaac wanted more than anything to believe Jesus's words.

“You will believe sooner than the rest. Haven't you always said that God is in everything?” said Jesus.

“True. Even if you were a wicked demon sent to taunt me, you must be God.”

“I am the messiah, Jacob. The world's long wait is over. And yours.”

Suddenly there was no difference between the light of day and the figure of Jesus. His radiance was joyous and unbearable at the same time.

Then Isaac felt Jesus lifting him in his arms like a child. The old man's blindness had returned.

“Will you come with me?” asked Jesus. “I want to meet our Father.”

Isaac felt weary to the bone. He couldn't summon the strength to say yes. But he must have, because Jesus's warm breath covered his face like a benediction, and then—silence.

When Abra woke up from her drunken sleep, she felt a guilty pang, followed by a desperate hope that her sisters had taken their father home. But the search party that found his body in the woods was already marching with a shroud-wrapped corpse into Nazareth. Abra could hear women wailing as she stepped outside.

Tears came to Abra's eyes, and she began praying for the departed. But she didn't wail. Isaac was old and infirm. God had showed him mercy. She caught up with the procession and touched the shroud. Its whiteness brought Abra peace. The city of God must be as white as this.

Grief started to rise in her heart, but the peace remained. After all, the messiah would soon appear. Everyone in Nazareth said so, and Abra was the kind to believe.

EPILOGUE

As you know, the local villagers are superstitious about me. Since they consider me a master of black magic and I consider them a nuisance, we keep our distance. In time most of them ceased thinking about me. I became like a twisted tree surviving on the wind-blown summit. Another gnarled pine that kept living out of sheer defiance.

So it amazed the temple lad—now almost old enough to take over from the priest—when I disappeared. The lad trudged up to the hut with an armload of wood one spring morning, only to find the door flung open. It must have been open for a while, judging by the way the wind had scattered my meager possessions and overturned my chair.

Nobody ever saw me again.

Far below, where the mountain people never venture, caravans grew more numerous now that the winter storms were past. I had trekked down and taken a place by the side of the road, watching. One day a wagon stopped, and a traveler dismounted. He walked a few paces and knelt on the ground. In his hands he grasped a small wooden cross.

I waited some minutes before saying, “I knew him.”

The traveler’s head swiveled around. “How? I’m the first disciple to come this way.”

I shrugged. “Even so.”

I made a gesture for him to join me—a pot of twig tea was brewing on the brazier. The traveler accepted, out of more than courtesy. He began to talk. He had been a disciple of Jesus almost from the beginning. Eager words tumbled from his mouth about the messiah, about miraculous conversions spreading like wildfire. Many had seen the resurrected Christ,

he said. The thrill of his story made the traveler, whose name was Thomas, so excited that he forgot to drink his tea.

When I pointed this out, Thomas smiled secretly. “Man does not live by tea alone.”

I asked about Judas.

Thomas was astonished that I, who looked as shriveled as an old monkey, knew Judas’s name. He shook his head.

“A traitor and a demon who deserved to hang.”

Which Judas had done by his own hand, after throwing Caiaphas’s silver back in his face.

“He hanged himself from a tree that was in full bloom,” Thomas said, “and overnight the white flowers turned blood red.

I nodded. “So, Judas will be cured and you will be the blessed Thomas. Good.” It takes vice to make virtue palatable. Thomas regarded me suspiciously.

“It’s the truth,” he insisted. “I put my hand in Jesus’s wounds after he rose from the dead, and that’s true too.”

I started smothering the fire in the brazier, which sent up dirty dung-fueled smoke. “Truth is as mysterious as God himself.”

The wagon driver was shouting at Thomas now; they had fallen too far behind the rest of the caravan. Reluctantly Thomas got to his feet. He wanted another crack at me.

“Would you follow my master if I proved to you that he rose from the dead?”

“No,” I said. “I’ll follow him because I have to.”

Thomas was baffled. But he waited by the wagon while I gathered my brazier and knapsack. I could have ridden inside, but I insisted on walking behind. I walked through merciless storms, suffered the taunts and rocks of village boys driving Thomas out of town, sucked dirty water from a cloth dipped in mud when a watering hole proved to be dried up.

Where were we going? I didn't ask and didn't care. I owed this to Jesus. I had challenged him to change the world, and he had done it. The light preceded us everywhere. I slept out gazing at the stars. They looked like tiny openings to a world beyond. Sometimes I went to the bright line etched between this world and that. I met Jesus there. We never talked but simply bathed in the radiance that conquers all illusions.

I didn't tell Thomas about these journeys. He would have believed me. But he would never have believed that Jesus brought Judas along.

"You are a great soul," I told Judas. "You were willing to play the villain on earth. You must love Jesus very much."

Judas was modest about accepting praise. All he would say was, "The earth is God's child. How could I not help a child?" It was understood among us that without Judas, there couldn't be this new thing, Christianity.

Of course, it's not such a new thing anymore. A hanging tree is sometimes called the Judas tree. Thomas is the Blessed Thomas. All of which was necessary. For what? For the moment in every soul's life when the veil falls, and beneath all show of rich and poor, sickness and health, life and death, creation sings one word.

Hosanna.

READER'S GUIDE

Jesus and the Path to Enlightenment

The tale is finished, and by the end Jesus has become enlightened. He sees God as pure light infusing every corner of creation. Just as the New Testament Jesus calls his disciples, including Judas, “the light of the world,” the Jesus in this novel sees God even in the man who will betray him. Nothing can be excluded from God, including evil itself, in the form of Satan.

Is this how Jesus actually felt? Is this how he became the messiah? Many readers will say no, and with good reason. As believing Christians (or not) they conceive of Jesus as static. He didn't have problems, and he didn't evolve. Jesus was born divine in a stable in Bethlehem and remained that way for the rest of his life.

A static Jesus stands outside human experience, and if that makes him unique—the one and only Son of God—it also creates a gap. For two thousand years this gap has been uncrossable. Millions of people have worshiped Christ without being transformed. With the exception of a handful of saints, Christianity has not turned believers into the “light of the world,” even though Jesus clearly intended for that to happen, just as he intended the Kingdom of God to descend to earth in his lifetime. Like Buddha and every other enlightened person, Jesus wanted his followers to become enlightened too.

Indeed, the only way to follow Christ's teachings is to reach his own state of consciousness. To achieve Christ-consciousness, in my view, means walking the path to enlightenment that he walked. For that reason, the Jesus of this novel faces everyday doubts and contradictions. He wonders

why God allows evil to triumph so often. He feels inadequate to change other people. He is torn between love for men and women and divine love. In other words, Jesus sets out to solve the deepest mysteries of life—this is the chief reason he isn't static, as the biblical version of Jesus often seems to be.

An impossible teaching?

I fully understand that confirmed Christians take church teachings quite seriously; disturbing their image of Jesus is upsetting. But the Jesus found in the New Testament already raises huge contradictions. Try and put yourself in the place of a first-century person—not necessarily a Jew—who has never heard of Jesus until one day you pass by a large crowd gathered on a hillside to hear this wandering preacher. Out of curiosity you listen too.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

MATTHEW 5:3–5

Stop there. Try as hard as we might, it's all but impossible to hear the Sermon on the Mount with innocence. Every word has been totally absorbed into Western culture, has been held up too long as both a promise and an ideal.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

MATTHEW 5:8–10

Beautiful as these words are, consider how easy it remains to dismiss them. The poor in spirit don't seem blessed; they are mostly ignored, if not cursed. Millions who mourn aren't

comforted. The earth seems to have been inherited by the wealthiest and most ruthless.

There's something disturbing about a gospel that never came true. Or if that sounds too harsh, a gospel that demands more of human nature than we are willing to give. The Sermon on the Mount continues with many unworkable teachings. For example, "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer" (Matthew 5:38–39).

Is such a commandment remotely possible to follow? What about the urge to combat evil on behalf of good? Everything from crime control to "good wars" is based on the premise that evil must be resisted. Jesus's famous phrase about turning the other cheek comes next in the sermon, leading to even greater improbabilities: "But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you" (Matthew 5:39–42).

As advice for material existence, the sermon is utterly baffling. Jesus tells his listeners not to plan for the future or to save money: "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven" (Matthew 6:19–20). Taken literally, Christ even asks his followers not to earn a living: "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?" (Matthew 6:25–26).

The sermon's whole tendency is to contradict our instincts about how to live in the world. Why did Jesus want us to go against human nature? I don't think he did. He wanted us, instead, to be transformed, which means going beyond the

lower self with its ego-driven urges. The Sermon on the Mount—and almost every teaching in the New Testament—points to a higher existence that only becomes real in God-consciousness, a state of awareness united with the divine.

As a faith, Christianity turned its back on such a radical call to transformation. The Protestant work ethic blatantly contradicts Jesus's teaching not to plan ahead or worry about the future. If Catholicism is tempted to feel pleased because Protestants aren't obeying Christ, how do they live with the most famous lines in the sermon? "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:43–45). If Catholicism had taken this to heart, there would have been no Inquisition or Crusades in world history.

Loving your enemies reminds me of a story from World War II that always brings tears to my eyes. The Nazis gathered up Jesuit nuns and monks and sent them to the concentration camps, along with Jews, gypsies, and homosexuals. One nun was subjected to the horrifying and perverted medical experiments associated with Dr. Josef Mengele, Auschwitz's dreaded "Angel of Death." The assistant who administered these torments was a woman, one of Mengele's nurses. In extreme suffering, the nun knew she was about to die, and her last act was to take the rosary from her neck. She held it out to the nurse, who recoiled suspiciously and asked what she was doing. The nun replied, "A gift. Take it with my blessing." They were her last words before she died.

Here was a living example of "resist not evil," and in a flash it tells us that Jesus's core teachings depend upon higher consciousness. Few of us could respond to deep, intentional evil with compassion unless, as with this nun, compassion had become part of our nature. In addition, such compassion must replace all that isn't compassionate, those instincts that force us to resist, fight, struggle, and curse evil when it touches our lives.

Jesus was the product of transformation, and he wanted others to be transformed also. Without the process of transformation, Jesus's teachings aren't merely radical. They are impossible to live by (except, of course, in those privileged moments when we find ourselves acting kinder, more loving, and more selfless than usual).

What, then, is the path that Jesus laid out? Parts of it are already familiar. Jesus told his disciples to pray. He asked them to trust in God. They were to rely on faith to accomplish miracles. Their attitude toward the world was to be one of peace and love. Millions of Christians still attempt to live by these precepts, yet something crucial must be missing, because we don't witness a large-scale transformation of human nature among Christians. Like the rest of us, they seem just as tempted to be unloving, violent, selfish, and narrow-minded, the difference being that they are tempted to use their religion to justify their behavior. (In that, they aren't alone—every organized religion creates an ethos that covers over human flaws with self-righteous rhetoric.)

THE MISSING KEY

There's more to the path that Jesus outlined, much of it overlooked because his teaching hasn't been viewed in the light of higher consciousness. Entering the Kingdom of God doesn't mean waiting to die and then joining God. It's an internal event here and now by which human nature turns into something higher. The Sermon on the Mount points to a transformed world that depends upon each individual's following Jesus's guidance. Turning inward seems familiar—every spiritual tradition demands it—but what do we do when we get there? That's the missing key. Speaking in a general way, the process of transformation remains the same today as when Jesus was alive.

Step 1: Shift your perception. The Sermon on the Mount occupies three chapters in the gospel of Matthew and covers many subjects. Yet throughout, Jesus keeps returning to the same general principle: God's reality is the reverse of material

reality. That's why the meek shall inherit the earth, why evil shouldn't be resisted, why we should love our enemies. It takes a shift in perception to see this, the same shift that Jesus himself made to arrive at unity with God.

Step 2: God's providence is given to all. When he says that the first shall be last, Jesus isn't referring to the material world, but to the action of grace. Like the rain, mercy falls upon the just and the unjust alike. The birds of the air and the lilies of the field aren't human, but they benefit from Providence, and if we think we must struggle to survive, we don't know God. Being everywhere, God makes himself felt everywhere (it goes without saying that "he" and "she" are interchangeable when speaking of God, and both are inadequate to describe the divine, which has no gender).

Step 3: Go beyond appearances. Your enemy appears to be your enemy, but in God's eyes the two of you are bound by love. To realize this divine equality, you must see beyond gross appearances. The sermon constantly pulls hearers to the soul level, away from the physical.

Step 4: Accept God's love. Jesus constantly seeks to reassure his listeners that they aren't forgotten or alone. They don't have to fight for the necessities of life, and the reason for this is that they are loved. As children of God, they can be denied nothing.

Step 5: See with the eyes of the soul. To live a new way, you have to grasp the opportunities for change. Seeing the world through old expectations and beliefs only reinforces untruth. In broad sweeps Jesus dismisses all received opinions, even when they have been handed down as the laws of Moses. He wants us to see with a different kind of attention, which comes from the soul.

By using words like "perception" and "attention," I'm emphasizing the way that reality shifts not through actions in the material world, but through actions that occur inside. When Jesus taught that the Kingdom of Heaven is within, he was referring to the mind (or consciousness). When he said

that no one can serve two masters, but must chose between God and Mammon, he meant that the claims of the material world—wealth, status, family, power, and possessions—are totally different from the claims of spirit.

The New Testament doesn't lay out a systematic way to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, and so we have to borrow from the great wisdom traditions, Eastern and Western, to fill in the gaps. In almost every tradition, and implicitly in Christianity, reality is divided into three levels: the material, the spiritual, and the divine.

The *material world* is the domain of the body and all physical things. Here we render unto Caesar what is Caesar's; that is, we pay the price, whatever it may be, for daily existence. Because this level of reality is dominated by desire for the good things in life, the pursuit of money, status, power, and possessions puts us in the service of a false god, symbolized by Mammon.

The *Kingdom of God* is the world of spirit, where everything that applies in the material world is turned on its head. Fulfillment isn't a far-off goal, but a given. Events are governed by spiritual laws, and physical limitations no longer exist. Sometimes Jesus calls this level of reality Heaven, and he spends a lot of time enticing people with its rewards. In Heaven everyone will be loved; ceaseless labor will come to an end; a banquet has been prepared for the poor and weak. In Heaven all inequality is banished because no one is a person anymore—everyone is a soul.

God, or the Absolute, is the source from which reality is born. It transcends the material world, but being infinite and unbounded, the Absolute goes beyond Heaven also. Christ describes a “peace that passes understanding,” meaning that even the mind cannot go here; God's reality is inconceivable.

All three levels penetrate one another. The material world, the Kingdom of God, and God himself are all present at this very moment in you and outside you. To believe that you exist only in the material world is a gross mistake, one that Jesus

came to correct. He offered salvation, which opens the door to the two missing dimensions of life, the world of spirit and the source of reality. The reason Jesus makes this seem so effortless (“Knock and the door shall be opened”) is that the two lost dimensions have always been here. We just mistakenly perceive that they aren’t.

Salvation has a practical benefit. When you realize that the material world is controlled by God, you stop struggling against the obstacles in life. The material world, it turns out, isn’t the cause of anything; it’s the effect. It receives its signals from the domain of spirit. Each of us receives impulses from the soul, and our thoughts and actions exist to carry them out. Since we do this imperfectly, life turns into a mixture of pleasure and pain. The soul wants only good for us, but that can come about only if the Kingdom of God came to earth, the very thing Jesus aimed for.

Even though the three levels of reality are always present, a person has to rise to higher consciousness to embrace all three worlds. When Jesus said, “I and the Father are one,” he indicated that for him it was natural to see everything at once. What did he see? A kind of cascade, beginning with God, flowing downward to the Kingdom of Heaven, and, after filtering through the soul, reaching its final destination in the material world.

Examples will help. Take happiness. Most people believe that external things produce happiness, or at least trigger it. A new car without dents in the fender makes you happier than an old beater with the doors smashed in. More money leads to more happiness through the pleasure it can buy. Constant pleasure, although unattainable, would feel perfect.

But Jesus taught that happiness on earth is a pale reflection of spiritual happiness. The intensity of happiness decreases the further away from God you are. God is pure bliss, a kind of unbounded ecstasy that nothing can diminish or change. This pure bliss cascades down to the Kingdom of Heaven. Here the soul is also ecstatic, but God’s bliss must be diminished for human beings to experience it. Therefore, the happiness that

pours from the soul becomes conditional. When God's bliss reaches the end of the journey on the material plane, we mistakenly believe that happiness comes and goes. It seems fragile and prone to change. We can be robbed of happiness when things around us go wrong. No longer do we perceive its true source.

THE JOURNEY HOME

Because his eyes were open to the source, Jesus saw reality for what it is: a constant manifestation of God. Why is anything true or beautiful or powerful? Because God contains Truth, Beauty, and Power. It does little good to know this intellectually. Experience is all, and therefore Jesus kept giving such experiences over and over. He performed miracles to show how insubstantial the material world really is. He kept reversing the rules of life to give people a taste of Heaven.

Yet all his teaching was in service of one overarching objective: to find the way back home. To his first Jewish followers, the spiritual history of humans had been one long exile. Adam and Eve were banished from Paradise. The children of Israel were in exile in Egypt and forced into captivity in Babylon. All these disasters were symbolic. They stood for losing sight of the soul and being separated from the Godhead. Speaking simply, Jesus offered Heaven as home and God as the Father who throws a banquet out of joy for the return of all his prodigal sons and daughters.

Jesus knew that God's lost children wouldn't find their way home through a dose of metaphysics. Therefore, he served as an example of someone who was fully physical and spiritual at the same time—God, the soul, and a mortal human being were united. Jesus didn't simply bring the light of God to earth; he was the light. (If it didn't so enrage Christians, I'd call him a guru—the word in Sanskrit means “dispeller of darkness.”) When Jesus proclaimed that no one could enter the Kingdom of God except through him, he wasn't referring to an isolated historical person born in Nazareth in the year 1 CE. All uses of “I” by Jesus in the gospels must be taken as God, soul,

and human, not because Jesus was unique, but because reality itself fuses all three. (Thus his saying, “Before Abraham was, I am,” is Christ’s way of pointing to eternity as his ultimate source.)

Now we have a much clearer picture of the path Jesus walked and the one he wants us to walk. Our goal is to shift our allegiance away from the material plane, to be guided by our souls, and ultimately to rejoin our source, which is God. Renunciation of the world, in the sense of giving up on it, has nothing to do with this path, nor does piety and ostentatiously living a religious life in order to seem better than those who don’t. Jesus scoffed at all such pretenses and dismissed the professional priestly caste of Pharisees and Sadducees—he called them hypocrites because they knew everything about the letter of God’s law, but nothing about its spirit. Not to mention that, like all priests, the Pharisees increased their own status and power by keeping people away from salvation. Protecting their exalted position meant more than showing anyone a path that can be walked individually, without recourse to religious authorities.

I think Jesus’s diagnosis, now two thousand years old, is as valid today as ever. Finding a way back home is the core of spiritual existence, indeed of existence itself. How, then, do we heal the separation that makes us feel abandoned by God and isolated from our own souls?

God Is Found Through Transcending

Jesus preached to his disciples that if they found God first, everything else would be added to them. This is our strongest indication that he was pointing not to a father figure sitting on a throne, but to the source of reality. Such a source can’t be found through the five senses; it can’t be retrieved by thinking about it the way one retrieves a memory. The only path is one of transcendence, or “going beyond.”

In Christian tradition there are many forms of going beyond, and believers today continue to practice them. Doing good deeds and giving to charity go beyond selfishness.

Praying for the solution to a problem surrenders it to God, going beyond one's own personal efforts. A monk's life sacrifices all material concerns, going beyond any gratification that would satisfy the ego and its unending stream of desires.

Yet I doubt that Jesus had such limited forms of transcendence in mind, because none of them alters reality. God is hidden as if behind a veil. He doesn't speak and is therefore concealed by the thoughts that fill our minds, which never stop speaking. Therefore, transcendence means going beyond the five senses and the mind's constant activity. Here the spiritual world divides, for the West, influenced strongly by Christianity, prefers contemplation of God's divine nature, while the East, influenced by India's ancient spiritual traditions, prefers meditation.

The difference between these two ways of transcending does not have to be so severe, however. In both meditation and contemplation the mind does two things: it quiets down and it expands beyond everyday boundaries. This is accomplished by taking a thought or image and allowing the mind to experience finer and finer states of itself. In mantra meditation, for example, the sound of the mantra gradually grows softer, tapering off into silence. In Christian contemplation of an image, for example, Mary's sacred heart, the image also fades, gaining subtle emotional significance. Meditation tends to be more abstract, since the mantra has no meaning, while contemplation focuses on love, compassion, forgiveness, or some other trait of God.

For many people a less abstract meditation is effective, such as the following meditation on the heart. Sit quietly with your eyes closed. Let your attention go to the center of your chest and without effort keep your mind focused on your heart. Feelings and images are likely to arise, and when they do, softly bring your attention back. Don't force anything; don't resist any emotions or sensations that arise. (Avoid trying to envision the physical heart or detecting your heartbeat—we're speaking of a subtle energy center instead.)

At first this meditation won't yield silence and perhaps not even calm. Everything depends on the state of your heart center, which in most people contains a good deal of conflict. Hidden memories will resurface; repressed emotions will want to flow. Let all of that happen. Soon the experience will shift, as you contact the heart as a center of tenderness and love. Whenever you enter the heart, what you're really seeking is sensitivity. The more sensitive your experience as you meditate, the closer you get to silence. In time, silence will also be transcended, however. It will open the door to an invisible presence. This presence isn't inert. It's very much alive, and the more you sit with it, the more it begins to express attributes of God. Love and tenderness are only two. God is also strong, powerful, all-knowing, boundless, eternal, and uncreated. Your goal is to find the source of all those qualities inside yourself and ultimately to embody them.

The Seeds of Earthly Life Are Planted in Heaven

If you were already in unity with God—the end of the spiritual journey—sitting motionless within your own being would be totally fulfilling. Not because you have escaped this world in a balloon, but because the Absolute, being the source, contains the fulfillment of all desires. When the Lord's Prayer says, "Thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory," the words indicate the place where all energy, bliss, and creativity come from.

But transcending has many gradations, and it allows you to experience the subtle level of reality, the plane of the soul. At this level of consciousness, unlike the level of the Absolute, or God, there are images, thoughts, and sensations that directly pertain to everyday life. Falling in love at first sight, for example, is like a direct transmission from this subtle realm. So is suddenly knowing the truth about a situation or hitting upon a brilliant solution out of the blue when other ways of solving a problem have failed.

These are only isolated glimpses. The entire subtle realm is within everyone. Here the most desirable things in life—love,

creativity, truth, beauty, and power—are planted in seed form, waiting to grow once they enter the physical world. To awaken these seeds, you can practice subtle action, that is, action on the level of the soul. This may sound esoteric, but think about anything you pursue avidly that brings accomplishment and a sense of joy. The following will be present:

Love and enthusiasm

Optimism

Desire to reach a goal

Focused attention

Immunity from distractions

Spontaneous energy

Bursts of fulfillment

Absence of resistance, both inside and out

You can translate these qualities into any object of desire—a lover’s pursuit of the beloved, a scientist’s cherished research project, a gardener’s dream of growing the best roses in the county. None of these activities begins on the physical plane; they begin as seeds in the mind. Activities that we don’t pursue, on the other hand, that quickly bore us or simply lack

enough momentum to get anywhere, are like stunted seeds. It's not good enough simply to pick up a signal from the soul; you must nourish it and make it part of your life.

What we're talking about here are subtle actions. You can apply them to your spiritual journey with as much ease as you apply them to your beloved, your career, or the Super Bowl, for that matter. The Christian path can be mapped out in terms of subtle actions that are not esoteric; in fact, they are easier to comprehend than traditional religious concepts like grace and faith.

Love and enthusiasm. Find what is lovable in Jesus or, if you are attracted to them, in Mary and the saints. Open yourself to the possibility that God loves you, that you belong in this world in order to have everything a loving father could give. Even if your present reality doesn't permit a wholehearted acceptance of this attitude, open a window. Love is more than a feeling that comes and goes. It's a permanent aspect of your own being, beginning at the source. You are meant to participate in love because you participate in yourself. Keep this vision in mind. Appreciate the most beautiful things in your life, whatever they may be, as expressions of love, gifts that come your way through grace, not by chance or good luck or because you worked hard.

Align yourself with a vision of God as a tree laden with fruit that bows down its branches to bestow some on you. Or think of God as the sun covered by clouds. You don't have to work to find the sun; you only have to wait for the clouds to dissipate. With this vision in mind, it's much easier to be enthusiastic about life, because suddenly the unknown isn't fearful anymore—it's a region from which the next good thing will emerge.

Optimism. Be positive in your expectations. This doesn't have to be merely a mood, and it shouldn't lapse into fantasy. Just be aware that at the soul level the seeds of fruition exist in infinite number. Bad seeds, on the other hand, come from the past, engendered by memory. We remember being hurt and disappointed, and by remaining attached to those bad

memories, we keep repeating them. The past plants bad seeds; the mind feeds them with fear and anger.

Optimism focuses on the good seeds. Thus they are given encouragement to sprout. Strictly speaking, I'm not referring to positive thinking. In positive thinking all negative outcomes must be wrenched around until something good comes out of them. In actuality, bad seeds yield bad fruit. But once you face a result that is painful or disappointing, step away from it and focus on the seed of the next situation, which can be a good one. Nobody is perfect at this. We all sprout bad seeds along with the good. However, with an attitude of optimism, you remind yourself to favor the good, and that shift in attention has a powerful influence. (I once knew a mathematical genius and asked him what it was like to think at his level of intelligence. Surprisingly, he said that he hardly thought at all. How, then, I wondered, did he come up with such intricate solutions to math problems? "I ask for the answer, and I expect it to be right," he replied. "When I'm not doing that, my mind is mostly quiet.")

Desire to reach a goal. Many spiritual people are suspicious of desire—if not condemnatory—but desire can work for you on the spiritual path. To do that, it must be focused, and so you need to have a goal in mind. (As a guru once told me, "The wind can't favor your sails until you pick a direction.") Too many people want to be filled with the light (i.e., they want to feel love, delight, fulfillment, and closeness to God) without directing those qualities. God is constantly on the move, because God is just another word for infinite creativity. Genesis occurs at every moment.

If you want to be successful spiritually, prepare to be on the move. The Indian savant J. Krishnamurti expressed this beautifully when he said that true meditation happens twenty-four hours a day. He meant that one should devote one's waking hours to subtle action, finding the most refined way to achieve any goal. Meditation isn't stasis. Silent, unspoken desire has enormous power, especially the power of intention. Direct your mind to a goal and keep focused, asking for reality

to unfold in the most fulfilling way. Then let go and watch what happens. Giving over even a tiny desire to God allows you to learn that accomplishment doesn't need to depend on ego-driven struggle. For most of us, it's good to stop at least once a day and consciously resist the urge to interfere. Stand back from the situation—it can be anywhere you are feeling resistance and obstacles—and see if higher consciousness can bring a spontaneous solution. Once you've achieved your first successes, using this same technique becomes effortless and in time a way of life.

Focused attention. In its own right, without any desire in mind, focused attention is one of the mind's most powerful forces. Focused attention is the fertilizer that makes the seeds of the soul come to life. "Seed" is simply a verbal token—what we're really talking about is the potential for a subtle impulse to jump into the physical world and grow. Before any piece of matter can emerge—a tree, house, cloud, or mountain range—its atoms exist first as pure potential. This invisible, motionless state then "warms up" into faint vibrations, and those vibrations acquire physicality. (In physics the shift from an invisible, or "virtual," particle into a visible electron is known as the "collapse of the wave function." It's the basic process by which the visible universe becomes manifest, blinking in and out of existence thousands of times a second.)

The same is true of future events in your life. An infinite number of events exists as pure potential. From this unbounded reservoir a select number of possibilities reaches the seed stage, which is vibrational. They are waiting in the wings to emerge into physicality. That happens when you turn your mind toward a possibility and say, "Yes, I pick you." Anything that has become important to you in your life followed this transformational route from invisible potential to full-blown event. Therefore, the more focused your attention, the more skilled you can become at activating unseen possibilities (a skill known in the Indian tradition of yoga as "one-pointedness").

Immunity from distractions. A second skill that goes along with focused attention is the ability not to be distracted. You find this ability quite natural when you're in love. Not only do you want to spend every waking thought on your beloved, but outside things also become flat and uninteresting. Avoiding distractions is effortless. In spiritual matters the chief distraction is ego. Being rooted in the physical world, the ego wanders everywhere, consumed by fleeting desires. It is pulled this way and that by fear and expectation. It indulges in fantasies and harbors deep-seated resentments.

The ability of the ego to grab your attention can't be overestimated. After all, the physical world is infinite in its diversity; the five senses never cease to bring new grist for the mill. You can't argue the ego out of its incessant demands for attention, pleasure, self-involvement, success, and winning; therefore, fighting back won't succeed. This is one adversary who must melt away gradually. And what melts it? The higher satisfaction of inner peace, love, calm, and fulfillment, which doesn't need to chase after objects in the physical world. Only transformation quiets the ego and puts it in its place. The best attitude to take while this process unfolds is patience, because gradually, as you experience transformation, the ego will loosen its grip. Keep in mind that "I, me, and mine" aren't the only ways to view life. You can fulfill yourself by living beyond ego, and in time that will happen.

Spontaneous energy. Spirituality isn't about trying. It's about what Buddhists call "nondoing." Jesus expressed the same notion when he taught that life is not something to worry about. The famous passage in the Sermon on the Mount about the birds of the air and the lilies of the field was an illustration of how nature unfolds spontaneously. Life flows; it unfolds without struggle. The energy needed comes without effort.

As a child you dragged your feet going to the dentist and got exhausted if you were saddled with tasks you hated, like mowing the lawn. But when you played, you had unlimited energy. Jesus has the latter state in mind. He wants people not to worry and struggle, because those are the worst ways to be

in the world: struggle comes from separation, an inability to let Providence do what it wants to do. Therefore, when you feel spontaneous energy—and not until then—undertake the challenges of life. If, instead, you feel dull, exhausted, depleted, stressed, or simply unenthusiastic, stop and replenish yourself. In this regard the spiritual way of life is also the most practical, because it taps into the source of spontaneous energy. If you have the courage to live the life you love, all the better.

Bursts of fulfillment. It may be part of the Protestant work ethic to postpone gratification, and Aesop's fable predicts woe for the grasshopper and wealth for the ant. Even so, Jesus held exactly the opposite view. Life doesn't wait for fulfillment tomorrow. It expresses fulfillment today. In the state of separation this sounds delusional. Therefore, as a reminder that the world's way isn't God's way, resist the urge to control, plan, postpone, and hoard.

All of these activities make time your enemy. God is timeless, and so are you. The timeless waits for nothing. It doesn't resign itself to dullness today in hopes of brightness tomorrow. Every occasion for a burst of satisfaction should be seized. When you see something beautiful, appreciate it. When you feel a loving impulse, say something to the one you love. Be generous each and every time you can. Withhold no good impulse. You may fear that you will run to excess and squander too much, but those feelings are born of fear. In God's reality, the more you give of yourself—in feeling, generosity, self-expression, goodness, creativity, and love—the more you will be given.

Absence of resistance, both inside and out. And then there's the Adversary. You must take into account those invisible forces that resist God, that deny fulfillment and extinguish love. There's no need to attribute such obstacles to the Devil or malignant fate. The truth is that human beings are entangled in the drama of good and bad, light and dark. Opposition fuels creation; there's no getting around it. But this recognition is very different from feeling obliged to fight the

darkness, either within or without. We are so addicted to struggle, not to mention war and violence, that we scarcely register Jesus's dictum, "Resist not evil." Yet evil itself puts up massive resistance; it is futile to adopt the same tactic.

The spiritual attitude in all things is to accept and say yes. The seeds of the soul grow in mysterious directions. You can never foretell when a temporary obstacle will lead to future good. "Everything happens for a reason" is a useful reminder of this. And yet pain and distress are not acceptable; being denied what you deeply desire is not an occurrence you should resign yourself to. Therefore, saying yes and offering no resistance cannot be taken as an iron rule. It goes without saying that push does in fact come to shove, and in those situations people fight, struggle, and practice violence. And when evil is conquered, however temporary the victory, something good has prevailed, perhaps God.

Even so, the higher way is not to offer resistance, to see if a peaceful way can be found. This leads to a general guide that sums up much of what has gone before. In any situation, when you find yourself acting in a certain way, observe what's happening and apply three questions:

Do I feel fulfilled and happy acting this way?

Is it easy for me?

Has it brought the right results?

Simple as they sound, these questions encapsulate much of Jesus's teaching. God intends for life to proceed easily; he wants us to experience fulfillment; he intends for the seeds of the soul to flourish as naturally as the grasses of the field.

At any given moment, measure your existence by the same standard. Life is too complex to master one situation at a time. The future unfolds too unexpectedly to allow for dress rehearsals. So you must acquire the skill of living here and now, and the greatest skill comes from the level of the soul. Reality cascades from the divine to the mundane, and yet by some miracle even the mundane is divine. The same miracle brings joy in the vale of tears and immortality in the shadow of death. It's not easy to extract one from the other. Therefore, we constantly need inspired teachers like Jesus. It would be a shame to be shown such sublime truth and not take advantage of it every waking moment.

Author's Note

This book isn't about the Jesus found in the New Testament, but the Jesus who was left out. The gospel writers are silent about "the lost years," as they are known, covering the span in Jesus's life between the ages of twelve and thirty. Jesus actually disappears before that, however, since the only incident reported after the birth narratives is the one (given only in the gospel of Luke) in which the twelve-year-old Jesus gets separated from his parents during Passover in Jerusalem. Joseph and Mary are already on the road home before they realize what has happened. Anxiously they retrace their steps and find their son Yeshua (as he was known in Hebrew) discussing God with priests in the Temple. Except for that one striking mention, Jesus's childhood and youth are more or less a blank.

Yet there's another Jesus left out of the New Testament—the enlightened Jesus. His absence, in my view, has profoundly crippled the Christian faith, for as unique as Christ is, making him the one and only Son of God leaves the rest of humankind stranded. A huge abyss separates Jesus's holiness from our ordinariness. Millions of Christians accept this separation, but it doesn't have to exist. What if Jesus wanted his followers—and us—to reach the same unity with God that he had reached?

My story is based on the premise that he did. By following the young seeker from Nazareth on his path to Christhood, I've laid out a map of enlightenment. It wasn't necessary to invent the map. Enlightenment has existed in every age. The path from suffering and separation to bliss and unity with God is well marked. I put Jesus on this path because I believe he walked it. Of course, any number of confirmed Christians will disagree, sometimes violently. They want Jesus to remain

unique, the only man who was also God. But if Jesus belongs to the world, as I believe he does, his story can't exclude everyone else who has realized God-consciousness. In this novel Jesus remains a savior, but he isn't *the* savior.

I didn't feel comfortable at first tackling a novel about the lost years. It's not conceivable to write a new scripture, and if you decide instead to present Jesus in a secular tone, you run the risk of denying his sacred role, which is absolutely real. I wanted to give believing Christians—and all seekers—even more reasons to be inspired. To do that, Jesus has to be brought into the scheme of everyday life. He worries about violence and unrest; he wonders if God is listening; he is intensely absorbed in the question, "Who am I?" My intention was in no way to contradict Jesus's teachings in the Bible, but rather to imagine how he arrived at them.

So what does Jesus look like as a young, doubting seeker? I wrestled with several possibilities. I could have pretended that this was a lost biography. But biographies need to be based on fact, and in this case we know few facts: the names of Jesus's family and scarcely anything else. Could Jesus read? How educated was he in the Torah? Did he live apart from Roman culture or mix freely with the imperial colonists and soldiers? No one can answer with any certainty.

Recent scholarship even disputes whether Jesus was a carpenter; some authorities claim that his father, Joseph, was more likely a stonemason or general "handworker," as such jacks-of-all-trades were called. In any event, the New Testament isn't biographical either. It's a partisan argument for why a certain charismatic wanderer was actually the long-awaited messiah, and it was written in turbulent times when other candidates for messiahship were making their case just as loudly.

Another possibility was to write a kind of spiritual fantasy, allowing my imagination to run free. Spiritual fantasies have no limits, since there are no facts to hold them in check. Jesus could train in a magician's workshop in Ephesus or visit the

Parthenon to sit at the feet of Plato's heirs. But this course seemed presumptuous.

Finally, I could have taken the familiar and beloved Jesus of the gospels and worked backwards. That would have been the safest course, a kind of *Young Indiana Jones* that whets our appetite for the hero we know is coming. If the gospels show us a man full of love, compassion, kindness, and wisdom, it's only plausible that he would have started out as a child who preternaturally displayed love, kindness, compassion, and wisdom. Over the years these traits would have blossomed until the day came, around age thirty, when Christ burst on the scene, asking his cousin John to baptize him in the river Jordan.

By revolving all these possibilities in my mind, I realized that more than one Jesus has been left out of the Bible. It only made sense to restore the one that's most crucial, the pivotal Jesus that begs to be known. For me, he's not a person, but a state of consciousness. How Jesus came to be united with God was a process that happened in the mind. Seen from the perspective of Buddha or the ancient rishis ("seers") of India, Jesus attained enlightenment. This was my true subject. A youth with the potential to be a savior discovered his potential and then learned to fulfill it.

I hope I can satisfy readers' deepest curiosity. What does union with God feel like? Can Jesus's path also be ours? I believe it can. Jesus was a teacher of higher consciousness, not just a shining example of it. He told his disciples that they would do everything he could do and more. He called them the "light of the world," the same term he applied to himself. He pointed toward the Kingdom of Heaven as an eternal state of grace, not a faraway place hidden above the clouds.

In short, the Jesus who is left out of the New Testament turns out to be in many ways the most important Jesus for modern times. His aspiration to find salvation vibrates in every heart. If it didn't, the brief career of a controversial, largely despised rabbi on the outskirts of first-century Jewish society wouldn't mean much. Yet as we all know, that obscure rabbi

became imbedded forever in myth and symbol. I didn't want the Jesus in this book to be worshiped, much less to push him forward as definitive. The events of the tale are pure fiction. But at a deeper level Jesus feels real to me because I've gotten a glimpse into his mind. One flash of insight answers many prayers. I hope readers feel the same way.

*Deepak
Chopra*

May 2008

Advance Praise for Jesus

“Like Anita Diamant with *The Red Tent*, Deepak Chopra has written about a Bible story in the form of a Jewish midrash, filling in the blanks in the biblical narrative about Jesus’s life. A la *The Da Vinci Code*, this thought-provoking tale is sure to ignite exciting questions and controversy.”

—Jill Gregory, coauthor of the international bestseller *The Book of Names* and the forthcoming thriller *The Illumination*

“It is such an original and intriguing approach to imagine which Jesus was ‘left out of the Bible.’ Chopra’s novel is a fascinating read.”

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—Cheryl Woodcock, correspondent and producer,
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“As a Jew I was taught to reject Jesus. As a mystic I was drawn to his light. This brave book invites me to approach Jesus anew, with great curiosity and a humble heart, and to love him, in the end, as my Self.”

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“Deepak Chopra has turned his profound gifts of insight and communication into creating a novel, *Jesus: A Story of Enlightenment*. But it is no ordinary novel, and in the closing

sections his thought-provoking questions will cause us to reflect in ways we may never have done before. It's the problem of a Jesus we never really knew, and of a gospel that apparently never came true, or more accurately that demands more of human nature than Christians have in the main ever been willing to give. If you think all that could be said about Jesus has already been said, then this book will be an eye-opener in the best and truest sense of those words. Do a major favor to your soul and read it."

—Miceal Ledwith, L.Ph., L.D., D.D., LL.D, was formerly a Professor of Systematic Theology and University President, and for seventeen years was a member of the Vatican' International Theological Commission

"We journey with a very human Jesus through a tough and turbulent landscape to discover his greatest message, that of personal transformation and enlightenment. Deepak Chopra's story is an inspiring gift for those who truly care and have the courage to seek."

—Michael Baigent, author of *The Jesus Papers*

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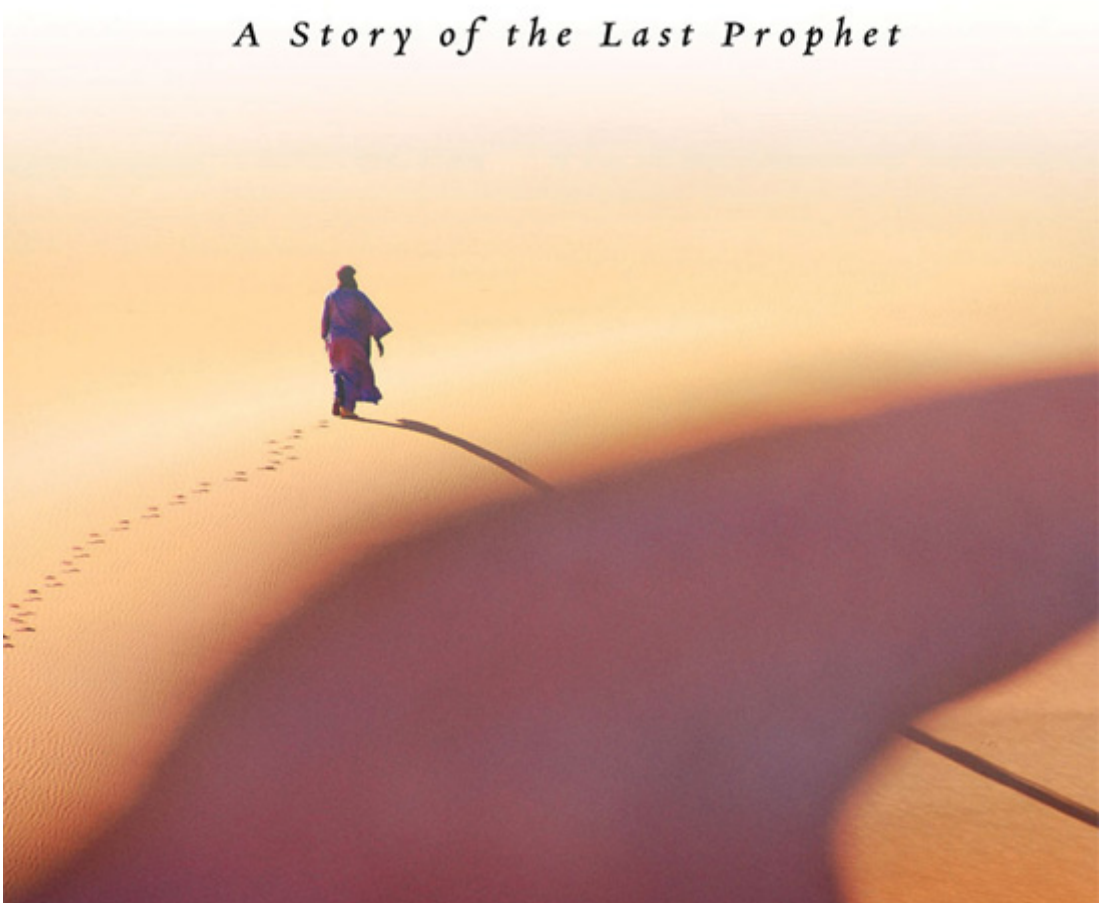
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The *New York Times* Bestselling Author

DEEPAK
CHOPRA

MUHAMMAD

A Story of the Last Prophet



Muhammad

A Story of the Last Prophet

Deepak Chopra

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Afterword: A Walk with Muhammad

Credits

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

A great surprise awaited me when I began writing the story of Muhammad, the last prophet to emerge from the Middle Eastern desert—the endless, bleak, arid land that produced Moses and Jesus. Muhammad has suffered under centuries of disapproval outside the Muslim world. Ours is not the first age to react suspiciously when told by adherents that “Islam” means “peace.” That suspicion only turns darker when extremist *jihadis* become terrorists in Muhammad’s name.

In his own lifetime, the Prophet fought strenuously against his opponents and led armies into battle for the new faith. I grew up in India among Muslim friends, but even there, where mingled cultures and religions are an ancient way of life, the partition of Pakistan in 1947 led to riots and mass murder on both sides. In the name of truth, believers can easily trample love and peace.

None of that came as a surprise, however. I was determined to be fair to Muhammad and see him as he saw himself in seventh-century Arabia—we can locate his birth in 570 CE, in the middle of Europe’s Dark Ages, two centuries before Charlemagne was crowned emperor by the pope in 800, almost six hundred years before the spires of Chartres cathedral first pointed heavenward in the twelfth century. That’s where the surprise occurred, because among all the founders of the great world religions, Muhammad is the most like us.

Muhammad saw himself as an ordinary man. His relatives and neighbors didn’t part and make way when he walked down the parched dirt streets of Mecca. He was orphaned by the age of six, but otherwise nothing exceptional stands out other than his ability to survive. Because he existed in a

fiercely tribal society, Muhammad had numerous cousins and other males of the Hashim clan surrounding him as his extended family. There was no mark of divinity on him (except those invented by later chroniclers as Islam prospered and spread). He grew up to be a merchant who happened to marry well, taking a rich widow, Khadijah, as his wife, even though she was fifteen years his senior. He traveled in caravans to Syria one season and Yemen the next. Mecca owed its prosperity to the caravan trade. Even though these sojourns were beset with danger—Muhammad’s handsome, favored father, Abdullah, had died on his way home from one trip—merchants of Muhammad’s class routinely made journeys across the desert that lasted several months at a time.

What is extraordinary is that there are so many marks of common humanity in Muhammad’s transformation. Jesus is being exalted when he is called the Son of Man; Muhammad deliberately blends in when he calls himself “a man among men.” He could neither read nor write, but that was common enough, even among the well-to-do. He had four daughters who survived birth and two sons who died in infancy. Doing without an heir was unthinkable, and so he took the unusual step of adopting a freed slave boy, Zayd, as his son. Otherwise, it is inexplicable that God should reach down into a settled husband and father’s life to speak through him. The most remarkable fact about Muhammad is that he was so much like us, until destiny provided one of the greatest shocks in history.

In the year 610 CE, Muhammad, a forty-year-old businessman known as Al-Amin, “the trustworthy,” marched down from the mountains—or in this case a cave in the semi-verdant hills surrounding Mecca—looking shattered and frightened. After literally hiding under the covers to regain his wits, he gathered the few people he could trust and announced something unbelievable. An angel had visited him in the cave, where Muhammad regularly went to escape the corruption and distress of Mecca. He sought peace and solitude, but both were destroyed when Gabriel, the same archangel who visited Mary

and guarded Eden with a flaming sword after God banished Adam and Eve, abruptly ordered Muhammad to “recite.”

The precise word is important, because “to recite” is the root word of Koran (or Qur’an). Muhammad was thunderstruck at this angelic command. He wasn’t someone who joined in the practice of public recitation, for which the Bedouin were famous. As a boy he had been sent to live with nomadic tribes in the desert, a common practice among prosperous Meccans. It was felt that the purity and hardship of desert life was good for a child. At the very least it took him away from the foul air and depraved city ways of Mecca. Among the Arabs the Bedouin were considered to speak the purest Arabic, but for the rest of his life Muhammad would betray his sojourn among the nomads, which lasted from his birth to the age of five, by having a rustic accent. The Bedouin were also famous as storytellers. They recited long legendary tales in praise of tribal heroes who conducted daring raids to seize camels and women from their warring neighbors. But Muhammad sat on the periphery as a listener rather than a participant, and he remained mute, so far as history is concerned, up to the moment when Gabriel found him.

The angel couldn’t persuade Muhammad easily. He had to lock him in a tight embrace three times—a mythical, mystical number—before he agreed to recite. What came out of the Prophet’s mouth were not his own words. To him and to those who began to believe his message, the fact that Muhammad had never recited in public proved that his words came from Allah. To this day, the Arabic in which the Koran is couched is singular, creating its own style and expressive world. Outside Islam, the only suitable comparison is probably the King James Bible, whose language resonates with English speakers as if spoken by either God or a chosen one who had been gifted with a divine level of utterance.

Because Muhammad never expected to be divinely inspired, the more tragic our suspicion and fear of Islam today. The pre-Islamic world feels much farther away than even the world of the Old Testament. Slaves were kept and cruelly

abused. So were women, and unwanted baby girls were routinely left to die on a mountainside after they were born. Arabs used knives to settle even petty arguments, and they thought it honorable to murder men from neighboring tribes. Revenge was something to be proud of.

None of these ways, barbaric as they are, belong to Arabs alone. All can be found in various other early cultures. But Islam has been branded with barbarity in a unique way, in part because, in its zeal to maintain the Prophet's world as well as his word, the customs of antiquity have been preserved into modern times. I portray Mecca as it really was, which means in all its harshness and brutality. To lessen the impact of our modern-day judgments, I use multiple narrators to share in telling the story. My storytellers are women and men of every caste, slaves and rich merchants, believers and skeptics, idol worshipers and eager followers of Muhammad's message alike. The first people to hear the Koran had as many reactions to it as you or I would if our best friend collared us with a tale about a midnight visit from an archangel.

I didn't write this book to make Muhammad more holy. I wrote it to show that holiness was just as confusing, terrifying, and exalting in the seventh century as it would be today.

After that, the other issues were fairly minor. Ornate Arab names can be difficult for outsiders to remember, so I have minimized the number of characters in the book, keeping it down to the most important. Spelling is doubly confusing, since the same words and names are transcribed several ways. I haven't been consistent here. At the risk of irritating scholars, I've used the old, common spelling of "Koran." I've reduced long tribal names to easily remembered ones like Abu Talib and Waraqah. And since the hamza (') and 'ayn (ع), for example, in a word like "Ka'aba," have no significance in English, I've done away with most of them, again in keeping with old, common usage. If sophisticated Arabic speakers are offended, I apologize in advance.

Finally, this is a novel, not an official biography. A few events are told out of order. Characters drop in and out of sight

as needed to keep the tale going. This could lead to confusion. To help orient readers, I have provided a chronology of the most prominent events in the story. It is followed by a simplified family tree showing Muhammad's ancestry and extended family. The people who appear as characters in this novel are printed in boldface, for ease of recognition.

An author has no business coaxing his readers into how they should respond. I can tell you, however, that what drew me to this story was my fascination with the way in which consciousness rises to the level of the divine. This phenomenon links Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad. Higher consciousness is universal. It is held out as the ultimate goal of life on earth. Without guides who reached higher consciousness, the world would be bereft of its greatest visionaries—fatally bereft, in fact. Muhammad sensed this aching gap in the world around him. He appeals to me most because he remade the world by going inward. That's the kind of achievement only available on the spiritual path. In the light of what the Prophet achieved, he raises my hopes that all of us who lead everyday lives can be touched by the divine. The Koran deserves its place as a song of the soul, to be celebrated wherever the soul matters.

CHRONOLOGY

(Because of the lack of verified dates, the ones listed below are approximate.)

570CE: Birth of Muhammad

590: Muhammad's marriage to Khadijah, which produces four daughters, and two sons who die in infancy

610(or earlier): Muhammad's first revelation

613: First public preaching

615: Immigration of some Muslims to Abyssinia

616–619: Muhammad's clan, the Banu Hashim, boycotted by the Quraysh tribe

619: Deaths of Khadijah and Abu Talib

622: Hijra (migration) to Medina

624: Battle of Badr, Muslim victory against larger Qurayshi forces; Jewish tribes expelled from Medina

625: Battle of Uhud, a victory for the Quraysh that is not followed up on

627: Medina besieged by Meccan army (Battle of the Trench); Qurayza Jews of Medina massacred

628: Treaty of Hudaibiyah, calling a truce with the Quraysh

629: Peaceful pilgrimage to Mecca

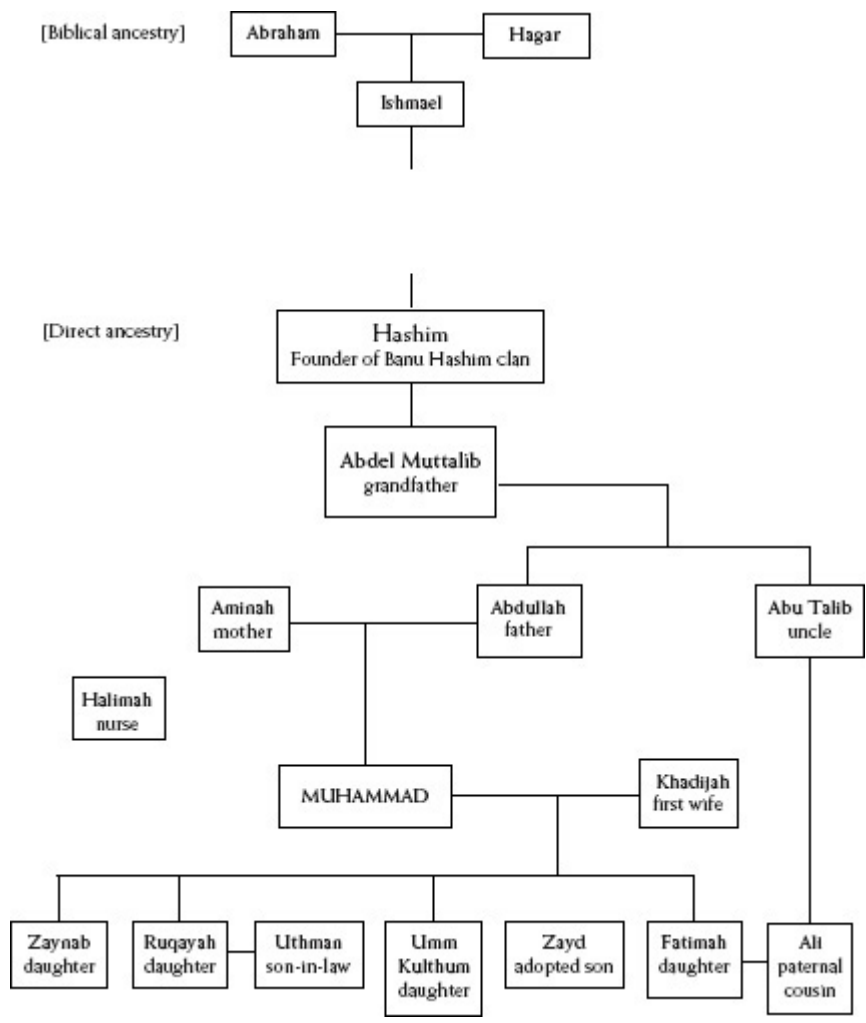
630: Mecca occupied by Muslims; tribal enemies defeated in other campaigns

631: Islam accepted in many parts of Arabia

632: Death of Muhammad

MUHAMMAD

A GENEALOGY



PRELUDE

THE ANGEL OF REVELATION

A mule can go to Mecca, but that doesn't make him a pilgrim.

God didn't put those words in my mouth. He could have; he has a sense of humor. Those are Arabs' words. They are a people of many words, a flood that could float Noah's ark. If you're a stranger, you might not see that. You'd be blinded by the desert sun that bleaches bones and minds alike.

The sun takes on other tasks. Drying up water holes that ran full just last year. Starving the whole crop of spring lambs when the grass became parched and withered. Driving nomads in desperation to seek better pastures. And when they got there, the sun glistened off fresh blood, because other tribes who would die without their pastures lay in wait to kill the nomads.

But the Arabs refuse to give up. "Let's turn it all into a story," they said. "The cure for misery is a song." There are other cures, but no one had the money to buy them.

And so they set out to turn starvation into a heroic adventure. Thirst became a muse, the threat of murder a cause to boast of their bravery. Arabs and God had in common this love of words. So when He heard a man say, in the depth of his heart, "God loves every people on earth but the Arabs," it was fitting that I should appear with one command.

"Recite!"

That's all that I, Gabriel, was sent to say. One word, one messenger, one message. I was like a hammer knocking the

bung out of a wine cask. One stroke, and wine to fill a hundred jugs spills out.

And so they did from Muhammad, but not at first. If an angel could doubt, I would have. I spoke to the one man in Arabia who didn't know how to recite. He sang no songs, much less an epic. He sat on the edge of the crowd when a wandering poet lifted his voice. Can you believe it? Muhammad had begged for God to speak to him, and when God answered, he was struck dumb.

Recite! What's wrong with you? Be filled with joy. The day that was heralded is now at hand.

Not him.

When I appeared, I found Muhammad in a cave on the side of a mountain.

“What makes you go there?” his friends demanded. “A merchant of Mecca should be tending his business.”

Muhammad replied that he went up there for solace.

“Solace from what?” they asked. “You think your life is any harder than ours?”

They saw only a man in a purple-trimmed robe walking through the marketplace and sitting in the inns to make trades over tea. They never saw the man with shadows in his mind. Dark thoughts hid behind a smile.

One day Muhammad came home pale as a ghost. His wife, Khadijah, thought she would have to catch him in her arms if he fell.

“Do not go into the street,” Muhammad ordered. He was actually trembling.

Khadijah rushed to the window, but all she saw in the street was a maid gathering bundles to carry away. The girl was crouched in the dust packing old rags, scraps of leather, and heaps of charcoal, tying them into bundles to sell in the hill towns around Mecca.

“Come away,” Muhammad exclaimed, but it was too late. Khadijah saw what he had seen.

One of the bundles moved.

She closed the shutters with tears in her eyes. It could have been a cat that needed drowning. But Khadijah knew it wasn't. It was one more baby girl who would not grow up. One more forgotten corpse, small enough to hold in your hand, that no one would find on a remote hillside.

Muhammad was forty, and he had seen this abomination all his life. And worse. Slaves beaten to death on a whim. Rival tribesmen bleeding in the gutter, because they spat on someone's slipper. He did business with men who actually committed such acts and who shook their heads when Muhammad spoke of how much he loved his four daughters. Muhammad smiled at his friends and their fine grown sons. Only in his heart did he ask God why his two sons had died in the cradle. Only in his heart did he say the one thing that made a difference.

I will not turn my face from you, Lord, even if you kill everyone I love.

God could have whispered in return, “Why believe in me, if you also blame me for these evils?”

Perhaps he did whisper such a thought. Or Muhammad might have stumbled upon it on his own. He had time to think, in those long days and nights in a tiny mountain cave. He ate little, drank less. His wife worried that he might not come home again, since bandits infested the hills outside Mecca.

She was almost right. When I appeared before Muhammad, he would not recite the word of God, he would not listen, and he wouldn't even stay put.

Instead he fled the cave, running up the mountain in a frenzy of alarm. The man who wished for God to notice him was terrified once he was noticed. Muhammad stole a glance over his shoulder. The ground was rocky, and he stumbled. The air was filled with strange sounds. Did he hear the

mockery of demons following him? Muhammad looked at the sky for answers. He wanted a way out.

He remembered the cliffs at the summit of Mount Hira. Shepherd boys had to be careful to keep lambs from running too close to the edge when a vulture circled overhead and frightened them.

What is circling me now? Muhammad thought with a surge of dread.

With a squeezing pressure in his chest, Muhammad gasped as he ran. He would jump from the cliffs and dash his body against the rocks below. He couldn't even pray for rescue, since the same God who might save him was the God who was torturing him.

I didn't ask for this. Let me go. I am nothing, a man among men.

Panting and stumbling, Muhammad clutched his robe tight against the gathering chill of Ramadan, the ninth month of the calendar. An evil month, a blessed month, a month of omens and signs. Arabs had argued over it as long as he could remember. After a few minutes the glaze of panic decreased. His mind was suddenly very clear. Muhammad looked down at his feet pounding over the ground as if they belonged to someone else. How curious—he had lost a sandal but didn't feel the jagged stones that cut his foot and caused it to stream blood. The decision to commit suicide brought a kind of comfort.

Muhammad gained the summit of the mountain. He spied Mecca in the distance. Why had he pursued God like a falcon after a desert hare? Mecca had hundreds of gods already. They lined the Kaaba, the sacred place, inside and out. One god for every worshiper; one idol for every sacrifice. What right did he have to meddle? There were countless sacrifices, day after day, that lined the town's pockets. Muhammad could almost smell the smoke from this great height.

Peering down at the rocks below, he trembled. In that moment of his destruction, Muhammad found a prayer that might save him.

Dear God, in your infinite mercy, make me who I was before. Make me ordinary again.

It was the one prayer God could not grant, for in that moment a man's existence was shattered like a wine cup carelessly trampled in a tavern. He would never be ordinary again. The only thing that mattered from now on would be Muhammad's words. The Arabs, as lovers of words, were poised. Would they love God's messenger or revile him?

Muhammad smiled faintly. A Bedouin saying had come to him: "A thousand curses never tore a shirt." *So why should I tear it myself? And my flesh and bones with it?* he thought. The image of his body crumpled and broken on the rocks below repelled him.

Muhammad turned away from the brink. *If I'm your vessel, handle me with care. Balance me lightly. Don't let me crack.*

I whispered yes. Who was I to deny him? I didn't even ask God first.

The merchant of Mecca limped with one sandal back down the slope. His tongue was thick and clumsy. Muhammad would recite as I commanded. He would never stop reciting, even if it meant his death.

ONE

THE WATER OF LIFE

1

ABDUL MUTTALIB, “THE SLAVE”

Can God’s love be so intense that it feels like hate?” I asked.

“Don’t speak of God,” my son grumbled. “He isn’t thinking about us right now.”

We were dragging a sledge loaded with water jugs to town. The water, which was brackish and warm, sloshed out whenever we struck rocky ground.

“God thinks about everything, and he does it all at once. That’s what makes him God,” I replied mildly. I looked over at my son, Abdullah, who was yoked to the sledge with a band of rope around his bare chest. It was backbreaking work, and he was in a temper.

We had drawn the worst lot when the water carriers gathered at dawn. Forty young men were sent by the tribes every morning to bring water into Mecca. There were no wells in town, and so water had to be hauled from the small wells that lay on the outskirts. Abdullah and I drew the farthest one, more than a mile away. Yoked like animals, bent low enough to eat the dust beneath our feet, we would be dragging the sledge until after sundown.

No one had pity for me, the old man. They all knew me as “the Slave,” and the name made them treat me with veiled contempt.

“I used to think God hated me,” I said, ignoring Abdullah’s sour temper. “My childhood was full of poverty and woe.”

“It’s a curse to be here now.”

I stopped pulling and spread out my arms. “I am in Mecca, my son, delivered into her holy gates by a miracle. What feels like hatred must be God’s love in disguise.”

Abdullah grunted. He had no interest in his father’s foolish miracle. All he cared about was being awakened out of a heavy sleep to walk through the predawn darkness. He had half a mind to rebel. He was the youngest son of ten, favored and handsome. His noble nose was so large that it touched the wine before his lips did. More than anything, though, he hated that his father, a rich man, bore the nickname “the Slave.”

“If I have to listen to you,” Abdullah said petulantly, “let me walk in the shade.” Water carriers stayed in the shade of houses and walls as much as they could, but now there was only a sliver of cool darkness, just enough for one man to creep into.

“You get the shade on the way back. We tossed for it.”

“On the way back the jugs are empty. It’s not fair.”

I shrugged and leaned into my harness. The sun was at its highest point. The heat burned my skin like a stove.

Love that feels like hate. That riddle had been on my mind for days. To me it was the whole mystery of life, only I hadn’t seen it before. Every curse is a blessing in disguise. Take this land of Arabia. Like a dangling jewel, it lies in the grasp of two empires. To the north the Byzantines hold out their fist, to the east the Persians. Surely that was a curse for a defenseless, scattered people like us. Yet the Arabs have never been conquered. The desert is too vast, too bleak. Wander off the trail for barely an hour, into the wasteland where only *jinn*s and scorpions thrive, and you would be lucky to find your way back alive.

Even there God has shown his mercy, because traders couldn’t sail around Arabia, not with pirates waiting in every cove and harbor. They were forced to march their precious silk and spices across the desert to Damascus. The result was prosperity for any town like Mecca lucky enough to be on

their route. The tribes praised the gods and vowed to make sure every traveler had water when he entered the city. Which only led to the next curse, that the water had to be hauled in every day, no matter how many backs it broke.

On and on life goes, like a necklace where one bead is a pearl and the next one poison.

No one wants to hear me babble about it. It was only the noonday sun that made me open my mind to my petulant son. Two nights ago, my obsessions with God's love became inescapable, and I lay awake with anxiety like a cold fever. I had taken a drastic, foolish step that day. I confessed to my cousins over a bout of wine drinking. It was at one of the tiny inns that cater to pilgrims near the Kaaba, where local men also meet.

"I cannot find a single blessing from God that is not also a curse," I said. "And no curse that is not also a blessing. Why is this so?"

There was silence. What was I talking about? My cousins only discuss three things: money, women, and camels.

One of them spoke up. "I lost another camel yesterday. Either my slave is faking the numbers, or he is letting raiding parties in for a pretty penny."

"If he was paid off, they'd take more than one camel," observed another cousin.

"Perhaps," the first cousin replied.

But I wouldn't be put off. "You don't care if God has cursed us? God has spoken to every people but the Arabs. Are we lost children who will never find our father's home again?"

The company went silent again. It made them nervous to hear me say "God" instead of "the gods." "It is so because it is so," remarked the oldest cousin, who gets exceptionally drunk every day and is exceptionally respected. The others nodded, and the conversation ended there.

I didn't expect an argument. The inn falls under the shadow of the Kaaba. All the ground around that sacred place is a sanctuary. No tribal fighting can break out there; blood feuds were cancelled; even violent argument has been outlawed. And I am chief of his clan, after all, so my cousins give me respect by listening with serious faces, even though they laugh at me on the inside.

My confession had done me no good. I couldn't sleep any better. Try and understand. I wasn't having philosopher's insomnia. This mystery applied directly to me—it would determine if my whole family survived.

It all began with water, a long time ago, in the age when memory began. After the raging waters of the Flood receded, and Father Noah descended from the ark, he bred a holy line of offspring. From his blood came Abraham, and from Abraham his firstborn son, Ishmael.

Now Ishmael's mother, Hagar, had only been a slave out of Egypt, belonging to Abraham's wife, Sarah. Because she was barren, Sarah told Abraham to take Hagar as his second wife in order to have children. Fourteen years later, a miracle came to pass, and Sarah became with child. She bore a son named Isaac. Afterward she demanded that Hagar be driven with Ishmael into the wilderness. Abraham bowed his head and obeyed.

When Hagar was wandering with the young boy, she grew desperately thirsty. There was no shelter under the open sky and no water in sight. Searching for a few drops to moisten Ishmael's parched mouth, Hagar went back and forth between the two hills known as Safa and Marvah. Ishmael began to cry. She was on the point of fainting, and they both might have perished, but God took pity on Hagar. He sent down the angel Gabriel, who touched the ground with his finger. At that spot the earth grew dark with moisture, and then the faintest trickle of water appeared. A miracle! Hagar bent down and drank, first cupping her palm to scoop water up for the boy.

As it is related, either Hagar or the angel said, “More. Let the waters accumulate,” which in Arabic caused the well to be named Zamzam, “the water that accumulates.” Mecca grew up around it. As a sign of God’s favor, Ishmael and his heirs had sole possession of the well and the right to sell the water for all time.

When I was a boy and first heard the story, I wouldn’t have questioned a miracle. Couldn’t I walk up to the Kaaba and touch its walls, where every stone is a miracle? Abraham had built it, the House of Allah, near where the well bubbled up. It was exactly like the first building that Adam had put up with his own hands, made of granite blocks and perfectly square on all sides. Arabs began to call it Kaaba. Through every tribal war and every invader’s attempt to vanquish us, it remained the House of God, long after the well of Zamzam, once the perpetual spring, had disappeared, for even Zamzam had a curse upon it, although it was many generations before anyone found out.

I looked over at Abdullah, who had taken to muttering under his breath. He was twenty and brawny enough for hauling water, but this was his first time. He had begged me to tell him why we were doing this menial drudgery, not even allowing ourselves a donkey cart. But I would say only one word, “Later.”

“Take my shade,” I offered.

“Your shade? Is that what you call it?” Abdullah was as proud as a rich man’s son ought to be.

Ignoring the rebuke, I pushed him into the shade of a high wall that circled a courtyard. Our own courtyard was the nearest to the Kaaba, a great mark of rank. Water had made me rich, but the seasoning to the feast was the envy others felt for me. I could taste it when I strolled to the marketplace every morning.

I said, “I’ve never told you about the miracle that brought me to Mecca. It’s time you learned.”

Abdullah didn't look surprised. I had made the same speech to each of my ten sons when they reached a certain age. "Your grandfather, Hashim, was the chief of our tribe. He preciously guarded the right to haul this water, which brought him revenue from every pilgrim and a tithe from all the other tribes in Mecca. As a boy I had no knowledge of this, because Hashim died mysteriously while taking a caravan to Egypt. My mother tied me up in a bundle and ran away, suddenly penniless and without friends. Hashim's brother had claimed his fortune. I, his oldest son, was pushed aside."

Abdullah didn't question these events. When a woman's husband dies, it is permitted for his brother to inherit his property if there are no grown sons.

"I grew up forsaken in a faraway town, creeping like a snake between heaven and earth. In the eyes of all Arabs I was an orphan. I was nothing. The lowest point in life is exactly when God bestows his miracles," I said. "Are you ready to hear mine? Without it, you wouldn't be here, handsome as you are."

Abdullah grimaced. I was enjoying the power my story had over him. I went on. "Some years passed. My uncle, Al-Muttalib, suddenly became horribly guilty. He had grown wealthy from Hashim's right to carry water, yet he had deprived Hashim's son of his share. Guilt wouldn't leave him alone; it was relentless. Therefore Al-Muttalib decided that this was a sign. Without a word to anyone, he rode away from Mecca, found me with my mother in exile, and lifted us from the dust. He promised to treat me like a second son. Two days later I rode before him as Al-Muttalib reentered Mecca. Yet people couldn't believe that this dirty boy who couldn't even sit up on a camel was anything but a new slave being brought home. On all sides they called me Muttalib's slave: Abdul Muttalib."

"And that is our shame," muttered Abdullah. He has always been quick to draw his dagger if another young male ridiculed his father's insulting nickname. Out of habit

everyone had forgotten my real name, Shaybah, and dubbed me “the Slave.”

With a grunt I leaned into my harness. I’m still strong. I’m not yet fifty. Yoked beside me, Abdullah had no choice but to keep up. For a while we silently dragged the sledge. And he didn’t offer to surrender the shade.

“I have given you knowledge today. So please answer me now. Can God’s love be so intense that it feels like hatred?” I asked.

My son knew to take the question seriously. “The answer doesn’t lie with God. It lies with your own guilt.”

“Explain.”

“If you cheated on my mother, maybe she would find out, maybe she wouldn’t. But in your guilt, you could feel her love as disguised poison. And if a man kills his brother, as Cain killed Abel, his guilt might make God’s love feel like hate.”

“A good reply,” I said. “But I am welcome in my wife’s bed without sin, and I’ve killed no one. I thought that being rich is a blessing, but I was a fool.”

Abdullah regarded me in disbelief, but I didn’t let him interrupt. “You think my riches aren’t a curse? That’s why I came today to the gathering place to draw lots. I wanted to see for myself what this backbreaking work is like. Look at me. After half a day I’m ready to drop in the dirt and perish. Do you see what that means?”

Abdullah had no idea what it meant, unless it was that his father perversely wanted to suffer.

I read his thoughts. “For one moment forget your vanity. Even if I don’t die from this ordeal myself, many young men will. I’ve seen their bodies wither; they fall sick. Stronger clans will easily wipe us out, or we will die out on our own, before our time.”

“What can we do, sir?” Abdullah asked, for the first time showing respect. Among us Arabs, nothing is more important

than the tribe. Ours was the Quraysh, the largest and most powerful in Mecca, which means that its downfall is in the prayers of every other tribe. It was unbearable for Abdullah to think of his whole race being annihilated one day.

“Zamzam,” I murmured. “That is what we will do.”

“What?” My son knew the name—everyone in Mecca did—but it was as legendary as Eden. He hadn’t wasted a moment thinking about the water of life, as the elders called it, still less what it meant to lose it.

I said, “I have to find the well again. Once I do, there will be endless water right in the heart of town. We Quraysh will no longer pay for our wealth with our lives. What do you think of that?”

Abdullah was tempted to think his father had gone mad. I could see that. But he didn’t dare say so. “You are asking God for a second miracle,” he replied cautiously. “Perhaps that’s one too many.”

I laughed. “I swear, if I am ever made chief of chiefs throughout Arabia, you will be my ambassador. Such smooth diplomacy. Wait until the women hear you.”

At this Abdullah brightened. As the handsomest of my sons, he had attracted glances from the girls all his life. But this was the first time I’d spoken of letting him approach a woman. Marriage couldn’t be far off.

We had talked so long that we were close to the cistern by now where the water was needed. This particular cistern was a shallow stone tank no more than eight feet across. When we arrived, two dozen women were waiting with clay water jugs on their hips. At the sight of the sledge, they let out the piercing warbled cry of tribal nomads.

“There you go. More women than you can handle,” I said.

I felt so wrung out that I let my vain, disgruntled son empty the heavy jugs from the sledge. Most of the water went to the waiting women, leaving barely two or three inches in the cistern. A cluster of palm trees nearby would shade it

enough so that the heat didn't steal everything. I liked this place. I admired the palms, which survived cannily on the drops spilled by water carriers and careless women running back to their families.

I rubbed my chest where the rope harness had left burn marks. "Zamzam," I muttered softly. Could I really find it again? The truth is, I didn't have the courage to mention my mad plan to my cousins, or even my wife. The men of our tribe would be justified in stripping away my fees. A lunatic has no business with sacred water rights.

Maybe God himself was against me. To everyone in Mecca, Zamzam had disappeared as divine punishment. One night, long before anyone living can remember, a righteous man became outraged by the greed and insolence of the rich and impious Meccans. No one knows his name. He furtively entered the Kaaba and stripped it of gold offerings and sacred idols. Even though Allah was God, the one and only, the tribes had forgotten him and lined the sacred place with their own gods, hundreds of them.

After throwing his loot into the well, the thief covered Zamzam over with earth, burying it from sight. He uttered a prayer that the well never be found by the unrighteous. God must have listened, because when the sun came up the next day, no one could remember where Zamzam was. The rich despaired; a few even repented. But they were lost. Mecca dwindled without its precious water. The sons of Ishmael departed. The place became desolate for centuries, until the Quraysh revived the town. They established the system of carrying water from the outlying brackish wells. They rebuilt Mecca, provided inns for pilgrims, and made the Kaaba a proper house of worship as before. All of which entitled them to be called the new sons of Ishmael.

"Can we go home now?" asked Abdullah. His eye was fixed on a pretty maid swaying her hips as she walked away.

"You won't catch her stinking the way you do," I said.

“If the only thing that stands between me and a wife is a bath, I have no worries,” Abdullah replied, certain of what he was talking about.

We wended our way home, the old man limping, leaning on the young one’s shoulder.

But even dead on my feet, I heard a sound. A faint rumble that could have been a muffled voice. Somewhere, Zamzam flowed deep in the earth and was waiting to be reborn.

God’s will is done in circles. No mind of man can fathom His hidden design. So, do not mock my obsession with finding the sacred well again. If I ever release its waters and perhaps even take possession of the gold that the thief flung into it, will God reverse His judgment?

“I beseech the blessing hidden in the curse,” I murmured.

“Just as long as I’m not cursed with another day like this,” grumbled Abdullah.

“You’ll go to your aunt’s house tonight,” I said. “Some young marriageable women will be there. Try to control yourself. We wed one at a time.”

Abdullah bowed low, mumbling profuse thanks for the invitation. One visit to a house of women made him as pleased as stealing some spring lambs from a rival tribe out in the hills. He began to whistle a love song.

When we were about to round the corner to our house, I said, “I can make it the rest of the way alone. I’ve sent word that one of your third cousins should run here, to finish the day’s water hauling with you.”

Abdullah’s smile froze.

2

BASHIRA, THE HERMIT

It's important to ignore the voices. When I first came to this horrible place, I was afraid of going mad. But soon I wanted to go mad with every fiber of my being. The old monk was still alive then, and he heard voices. He said they came from God, but he had lost his mind years ago.

The old monk spent every waking moment writing. At first I was in awe, because I can only write my name. I was taught how by the elder brothers, so that I might sign my contract with Christ, to be his servant for life.

“What are you writing?” I asked the old monk, whose name was Celestius.

“The Bible,” he replied.

He gave me an irritated look. Celestius rarely spoke. The usual sound that came from his mouth was the crunch of his teeth on the flatbread we ate at every meal. Our grinding stone leaves grit in the flour, and his teeth had worn down to stubs.

But I must explain about the Bible. There is no Bible. The length and breadth of Arabia has never seen such a precious object, or if it has, the pagans buried it in the sand or ate it when they got truly desperate—boiled vellum might retain some bit of lamb fat. I myself saw a Bible only once, when it was placed against my forehead in Damascus, the day I gave my life to Christ, our Lord.

Trying to hide my disbelief, I asked Celestius, “Where is this Bible you are copying?” He must have hidden it well. Our cave contained two straw pallets for sleeping and a clay pot for

washing. All the cooking had to be done outdoors or the smoke would choke us.

Celestius assumed a crafty look. “Don’t need a Bible,” he said tapping the brown-spotted dome of his bald head. “In here.” He smiled secretly, showing his upper row of stubs.

Well, crazy is as crazy does. If he wanted to copy the Bible out of his head, so be it. I asked him to read a Psalm to me.

“Haven’t gotten there yet,” he said. “They told me to start at the beginning.” And that was the end of the discussion. As punishment for interrupting him, he refused to acknowledge me for a month, as if I were invisible like his Bible.

I used to hear the Psalms through the church windows when I was lost on the street in Damascus. They aren’t all about the valley of death, although there were days I wanted to go there, starving days in the back alleys that smelled of raw sewage. Sewage has its uses if you don’t want someone to find you.

I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills,
From whence cometh my help.
My help cometh from the Lord,
Who made heaven and earth.

The Psalmist must not have seen the hills of Bostra that circle our cave. There’s no help from there.

Or so I thought.

One day Celestius seemed to take longer than usual to unfold his creaking limbs in the morning. I poked him but he didn’t move or let out a grunt. He had died sometime after midnight prayers. From the way his arm lay outstretched in the direction of my pallet, I suppose he had wanted the last rites. A bit late on that one, my brother. I put him in the earth with a rough marker on his grave. He would keep a long time, what with the lack of rain. Eventually a caravan would pass by carrying a Christian, and then the body could be taken back to Damascus for a proper burial.

I didn't fear loneliness. Actually, it was good to be rid of him. I love my fellow man, as Christ commands me to, but toward the end Celestius was too mad to remember to dress or clean himself. I saw his bony behind once too often. After I buried the old monk, a trader from Tyre came by one day who could read, and I showed him a stack of pages from Celestius's "Bible." The trader laughed and said it was complete gibberish. No surprise. The only thing of interest was the last page. On it Celestius had written the same line over and over until his hand faltered and the letters turned to faint squiggles:

When the sun's face is hidden, God will bring his last prophet.

"Are you sure that's what it says?" I asked. Because he was my guest, the trader had no reason to lie. I will grant the pagans one thing—they hold hospitality sacred. I had invited him into my cave for food and drink—a proper meal, not just flatbread and grasshoppers. I sell religious trinkets to travelers (with a little work a goat's shinbone can be made to look very much like a saint's), and with the money I buy supplies from the caravans. Dates and figs, usually, but also honey, olives, hard cheese, and dried meat. Wine, of course, in clay jars sealed with pitch.

The trader assured me that he had read the line just as it was written, but to be certain he took the page outside, where the setting sun still imparted an amber glow to the hills. *When the sun's face is hidden, God will bring his last prophet.* Celestius wasn't sure about the spelling of the word "prophet," so he had put in three versions and one of them was right, the trader told me. The trader said he'd be glad to read the other gibberish to me too, but that just meant he wanted more wine. I gave him another cup out of charity, even though my heart sank inside. This man from Tyre had delivered me a world of trouble without knowing it.

God will bring his last prophet. Impossible. The old monk was simply delirious. God has already sent his only begotten Son. The prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled. Unless...

Unless Jesus has forsaken us.

Unless God has changed His mind.

Unless the Devil has found me in the smallest, darkest, dirtiest cave on the face of the earth.

What a curse when the mind hits upon that tiny exception—*unless*. It appears like a black mote on the far horizon. And no matter how hard you struggle, the speck grows and grows until one day it swallows up the sky. What could I do? I prayed. I asked God for a sign. One night after thrashing in bed covered in sweat, I rose and burned all the pages the old monk had scribbled. Yet when I got to the last one, fear gripped my heart, and I couldn't put it to the flame. So either God or the Devil has power I couldn't resist.

After that I spent my days watching the sky, waiting for the face of the sun to be hidden. A stranger found me that way, squatting on the ground outside my cave.

“Why are you staring at the sun, old one?”

I looked up to see a tall, turbaned man who was as dark as his shadow. Perhaps an Abyssinian. They say that if you cross the sea to their kingdom, which is Christian by the grace of God, there are many Bibles, some covered in cloth of gold. Maybe here was a man I could talk to.

“I'm not staring at the sun,” I replied.

“Good. The sun is the eye of Nabul,” he said. “You'll go blind if you gaze into it.”

Nabul is one of their countless idols in this forsaken place. The stranger was an unbeliever. I got to my feet, so that when I told him to go away, we'd be looking eye to eye. Then I saw something over his shoulder. A cloud had appeared in the sky out of nowhere. In this land where sand dunes roll like an endless sea and rain falls only to moisten the graves of those who hear the Last Trumpet, there was a cloud.

I pointed with my finger. “Is that your caravan, stranger?” Camels and wagons crawled in the distance.

“I travel ahead of it as a scout. Those are traders from Mecca, and not very rich ones, either,” he replied.

I barely heard the words. The cloud, which was not large, cast its ragged shadow on the earth. From up above I could see it clearly. What amazed me was this: the cloud was directly over one wagon in the caravan, and as the camels lumbered along the trail, the cloud moved with them, always shading one particular wagon.

“Who rides in that cart?” I asked.

The black man shrugged. “It could be anyone,” he said. Except the slaves and servants, who were forced to walk. I could see a straggling line of them keeping pace with the camels. I counted. It was a small caravan by the standards of the great ones from Yemen when an engorged ship from the East has unloaded its cargo of silk, iron, perfumes, and spices. I counted no more than two dozen camels and three donkeys.

“You look pale,” remarked the stranger. The next thing I knew, I felt something cool and damp being pressed against my forehead. I opened my eyes and touched my face with trembling hands.

“Maybe you were gazing into Nabal’s eye after all,” said the man. “You fainted.” He pressed the damp cloth to my forehead again, but I pushed him away.

“I have to see,” I mumbled and staggered to the mouth of the cave. Thank God I had not been unconscious for long. The threadlike procession of the small caravan was still in sight down below. And yes, the cloud was poised directly over one wagon. I watched until they were out of sight. Nothing changed. The face of the sun had been hidden, and God was protecting someone with cool shade. The possibility was staggering. I had to find out who was in that wagon.

For the rest of the afternoon I paced restlessly trying to think it through. The Devil could be tempting me. I hadn’t seen the stranger walk up my hill, and I hadn’t seen him depart. He could have been Satan’s minion, able to appear and

disappear as he was bidden. But the man hadn't asked me to renounce God, and he didn't leave me lying in the sun to die when I fainted. The Adversary doesn't do good deeds. Then I realized that this logic was ridiculous. If the Devil had found me, I was lost already. He'd gnaw at my soul like a desert rat by tiny, maddening bites until he got what he wanted.

In the end I waved to a village boy passing by with three skinny goats and told him to invite the men of the caravan to my cave for supper. He nodded and ran off. The people around here have a superstitious regard for me. I swept the cave and brought out my best provisions. A rare mood had come over me. I whistled while cracking open the best wine jars, soaking the dates in water to plump them up, and throwing out any fig that had been infested with maggots. This was going to be a kind of last supper. Either God's word was coming true, or my soul was about to be snatched by madness. One way or another, the end had come.

Folded up under my pallet was an embroidered cloak that signified who I was—not a filthy beggar with matted hair, but a priest. When they sent me into the desert, the Damascene fathers presented it to me. "Never forget who you are," the abbot said gravely. "And don't come home until this is your winding sheet."

I smiled to myself, wrapping the scarlet cloth around my narrow shoulders. Moths had chewed small holes in the wool, but the gold embroidery twinkled in the dimness of the cave. The cloak was still a fine thing. I sat in the midst of the feast I had spread out and waited for sundown. Once or twice I nodded off—the aftermath of my great excitement—until I heard men's voices coming up the hill.

"Bashira. Are you he?" the head man said when he got to the mouth of the cave. These Arabs are horrible unbelievers, but they speak formally when they come as guests.

I lit an oil lamp and held it close to my face. "Is there another cave waiting for you that is set with a feast?" I asked.

The glow from the lamp illuminated my scarlet robe, giving it what seemed like an inner light. The Arabs looked at each other doubtfully. They believe in all kinds of spirits, especially those who roam the desert after nightfall to suck humans dry of their souls. But the lead man didn't falter. Seeing the food and drink all around me, he stepped inside with a bow.

They sat in a circle and began to eat. None of them said a prayer or cared two beans that I did. A couple of them splashed the floor with wine as offerings to their idol. The name didn't matter. Idols were more plentiful than horses or cattle. If you climbed a tree to escape a prowling jackal, you could turn that into your god if you wanted to.

Being guests, the men didn't attack the food like ravenous beasts, but ate with dignity. I sat silently and watched. Which one was the prophet? It wasn't long before dignity grew thin. As the wine flowed, the talk grew louder and coarser. To them I wasn't a holy man, so they spoke freely of women in the streets and their many conquests. The hours wore on. Tongues wagged, then heads nodded. But I kept my gaze alert. *Which one?* The full moon had sent slanting light into the cave for the first hour, but it had long set under the stark, treeless horizon. I turned to the head man, who had seated himself on my right. He wasn't sober, but he was still coherent.

“Is there anyone here I should know in particular?”

He looked puzzled, and why not? I had no words for what I wanted to say. I tried again. “I am looking for someone favored by the gods,” I said. “Does any of your clan have a mark upon him?”

“What?” He shook his head in confusion and asked for another cup of wine. I gave it to him and sank back into my gloomy thoughts. Not for the whole evening had I seen a sign of God's intentions. These were coarse, ordinary traders, drifters across the face of the desert. Someone was toying with me.

The men rose to leave, each helping the other to his feet. They staggered out into the night, which had grown dark and thick without the moon. Torches were lit, and the head man bowed to me. He was about to turn away when he said, "I have put some dates and figs in my bag without asking your permission. They're for my son. Forgive me."

I tried to keep my voice from trembling. I asked him why his son stayed away. I had explicitly invited every man of the caravan. He said that they had left behind no men. His son was still a boy. They'd left him behind to guard the animals and raise the alarm at the first sign of raiders.

"Send the boy to me," I said. "My Lord Christ bids me to offer food to every stranger tonight, without exception."

To his superstitious mind this was logic enough, not that he had any regard for the name of Christ. The head man gathered his homespun skirts about him and sat down on the ground after barking orders at one of the others. His men bowed and departed down the hill.

"Actually, I'm happy you called for Muhammad," he said. "I felt guilty leaving him alone when one of the slaves could have watched over everything."

I remarked that I'd never seen a boy on caravan. They were dangerous affairs, weren't they?

He sighed. "Just so. My tribe has suffered from death in faraway countries. Our caravans have been cursed. Especially one time." He was leading to a tale, but suddenly he stopped and looked away.

Half an hour later his man returned, apparently alone. But as he got closer, I saw the outline of a small boy walking behind him. The two approached, and with beating heart I looked at the boy's face. He barely glanced my way, bowing to his father.

"Abu Talib, I am here to serve you," the boy said gravely. He looked to be about twelve, short and compact. In the dim glow cast by the cooking fire I couldn't see his eyes. Only

when he was told to greet his host did he turn to me, and then his eyes were cast down to the ground.

“Your father says you are called Muhammad.”

It was a simple statement, but the boy hesitated before nodding his head.

“Who are your people?” I asked. Before he could answer, his father interfered. He jumped to his feet and pulled him close. “To you our people are nothing, so why question a boy?”

I looked surprised. “You act as if I might hurt your son. What is it?”

“He’s precious to me. His mother died when he was just barely walking.”

That wasn’t the whole story. These Arabs can take any number of wives, according to their custom. I had a burning need to know about this boy, and so I asked God what to say before he was snatched away. There was only a moment left; the head man wasn’t anxious to stay. Suddenly I saw the truth.

“He isn’t your son,” I said flatly “You’ve been lying. Why?” My voice was clear and strong. “I am asking you as a holy man. God has told me something important, but first I must know the truth.”

The head man grew nervous. A strange thing about the Arabs is that they respect the name of God, despite all their idols. It’s not something they freely talk about, but I’ve been told that they know there is only one God. There was a time when their worship was pure. They even look to Abraham as their father. But over time they fell into idolatry.

“I need the truth,” I repeated. “Who are you, Abu Talib?”

“I am his uncle and head of the clan,” Abu Talib admitted with reluctance. “My lie wasn’t a sin. I am the boy’s protector.”

“So he’s an orphan?”

Abu Talib nodded, and the boy drew closer to him, folding his small body into his uncle's robe. I knelt down. "Muhammad, a caravan is a dangerous venture, but you're safe here. Will you speak with me? I implore you. Your fate is important. Or do you know that already?"

I put my forehead to the ground, as if addressing a superior. That would frighten an ordinary boy or make him burst out laughing, but Muhammad straightened up.

"What I know is my concern, not yours," he said.

"No, boy," his uncle said sharply, then turned to me. "Forgive him. His father, Abdullah, was proud."

"My concerns are God's, and he takes no offense. Yet I still need to speak to you." I kept my words and my eyes fixed on the boy.

He pondered for a moment.

"Are you asking your gods to decide for you?" I asked.

I named Al-Uzza, one of their female idols—a bitch goddess they pray to for fertility—whose name I had once overheard.

The boy scowled.

"She isn't your favorite? She's beautiful and has large breasts," I pointed out.

"Mocking me will only make me run away," he replied. "I won't touch any idols or perform their rites. "

"Why not?"

"If you're a holy man, you already know. There is no God but God."

My heart jumped in my chest, and I had to hold my arms tight around myself to keep from reaching out to this strange child. If only he stood closer to the fire, so I could see his eyes. They would tell me. Abu Talib was gazing proudly at his nephew.

“He is special,” I said, and he nodded. His uncle had no idea. None of them did. Their caravan would be moving on before dawn. Whatever I had to say, it had to be at that moment. Boldness was the only way.

“I know about you, far more than you imagine,” I said. I put my hand on his shoulder and pulled him away from his uncle. Abu Talib could have taken serious offense, but he didn’t move. I led Muhammad to a bowl-shaped depression in the ground. It was as far around as a man could stretch out and three hands deep.

“Can you guess who dug that hole? A crazy man. He was living in this cave before I came here. If I hadn’t dragged him away, he would have clawed at the earth until his hands bled. He died one night without recovering his wits.” I wasn’t lying. Toward the end Celestius had forsaken the Bible and became obsessed with digging where his voices told him to. I tried to coax him out of his mad fixation, but he still managed to dig a sizable hole.

The boy’s eyes widened with curiosity. “Why?”

“He thought the water of life was down there, and he had to find it.”

Muhammad pointed to the jugs of water lined up at the mouth of the cave. “You mean them?”

I shook my head. “No, the villagers haul that up to me. The water of life doesn’t flow out of the ground. It flows from here.” I lightly touched his chest over the breastbone. “You were born in the desert, but it’s a fearful place for me and every holy man. We come here for only one reason, to find the water of life.”

“And did you find it?” he asked solemnly.

“Not for many, many years. The old monk who scratched at the earth had lost his mind. He despaired of ever finding it. But tonight my quest may be over.”

Muhammad listened calmly, as if this all made perfect sense to him. His uncle was now visibly agitated. Unable to

keep quiet, he burst in. “My family found it. The well was buried for centuries. But a dream came to my father, Abdul. He saw the very spot where Zamzam lay under the ground. He was our savior, blessed be his name.”

In an excited voice he unfolded the tale, and even with a mongrel blend of Greek and Arabic, the tongues of traders, I understood. This well they call Zamzam was promised to them by God at the time of their ancestors, and it was to flow as long as time. But God became angry when the people turned to idol worship, and he made the well disappear. Mecca could have been a great city glorifying his name. Instead, God granted it only enough water to survive, and that had to be obtained by hard labor.

Abu Talib’s father, “the Slave” as he was known, became obsessed with finding Zamzam. Some say he secretly swore an oath to sacrifice one of his sons if the gods showed him where to dig. Others say that he converted back to the one God of their ancestors. Whichever it was, Abdul was given a dream. He saw a spot between two of the largest idols, near to their house of pagan worship, the Kaaba. Everyone in his tribe laughed at him, but the Slave insisted on digging everywhere around that spot. Lo and behold, one day a man thrust his spade into the ground and hit something hard. It was a well cover, and when they removed it, water came forth. Zamzam had been found again, along with the golden hoard and idols that had been stolen from the Kaaba. Abdul returned them, keeping only a portion of the booty for himself.

Abu Talib stuck out his chest as he finished his tale. “So you see, my people have found the water of life. God showed it to us.”

“God’s works are mysterious,” I said mildly.

His eyes narrowed. “You don’t believe me?”

I had a polite answer on my tongue, but the boy Muhammad spoke up. “The well was a sign, sir. There is water no one can see, that never wets anyone’s lips. That’s what the holy man means.”

The uncle looked confused, torn between anger at being called a liar and pride in his precocious nephew.

“Not just a sign,” I said hurriedly. “A great sign. God has showered blessings on your tribe.”

You’d think the uncle would have been pleased to hear this; after all, he had just said the same thing. Instead, his face darkened. “My father, Abdul, used to swear that God’s love is hard to tell from his hate. His favorite son, my brother Abdullah, died from a sudden sickness while coming home with a caravan. When we heard about it, messengers and physicians were rushed to him, but he had already been buried, no more than two days journey from his wife. They had been married only two months. She perished from grief, and now, but two years ago, my father followed them. If you really are a holy man, find the blessing in that.”

The blessing is that you brought this boy to me.

Hiding my thoughts, I mumbled again that God’s works are mysterious, and Abu Talib nodded sadly. This talk had unfolded many things close to his heart. Between that and the wine, he seemed to trust me, so I held tight to Muhammad’s rough wool cloak and pulled him near the fire. He didn’t object, and for the first time I could look into his eyes.

Ah.

“What do you see? Is he cursed too?” asked the uncle gloomily. “I took in my brother’s son after he was orphaned. I’ve always tried to keep him safe.” “You haven’t protected him well enough,” I warned.

“No, don’t say that! Only one good thing came from Abdul’s dying. It broke his heart to lose Abdullah. He couldn’t bear it if Muhammad will be snatched away too.”

Abu Talib had misunderstood my meaning, but the boy didn’t. He allowed me to keep gazing into his eyes. He was willing to let me see. Suddenly I couldn’t keep back the tears. I began to weep silently, turning away so that the two of them might not notice.

“It’s all right,” Muhammad whispered. He laid his hand gently on my gray head, as if we had changed places and now I was the boy, he the man.

The uncle became even more alarmed at my behavior. “Tell me!” he cried.

There was no explaining my anguish. I felt my faith slip away from under me like sand under my feet. Where was my Lord? What would become of us poor seekers in the wilderness, waiting these long centuries?

I regained control and turned to Abu Talib.

“Pardon me. There is no curse. You must protect this boy as if he were your most precious possession. He is God’s.”

The uncle looked astonished, not just by my words, but by the calmness in Muhammad. “You still haven’t told me what you saw.”

“A light. Here.” I put my finger lightly on the space between the boy’s eyebrows.

I waited for the uncle to protest. Instead, he froze, and his head trembled. He turned to the boy. “Go.” The word came out as a hoarse croak. He pointed toward the bottom of the hill, where the man who had brought Muhammad from camp was waiting in the dark to take him back.

Muhammad bowed without saying anything and left. When he was out of earshot, Abu Talib recovered the power of speech.

“There’s a secret the boy doesn’t know,” he said. “He was born nine months to the day after Abdullah got married. My brother never saw him. Before he set out on the journey from which he never returned, Abdullah took me aside. He had a premonition, and he begged me to take care of his son. I was astonished, for no one knew that Aminah, his bride, had already conceived.

“Why come to me?” I asked. “There was our father, a wealthy man, to take care of his grandsons. And besides, of

my father's ten sons, we all knew who his favorite was.”

Abu Talib paused and waved his hand. “Never mind. It’s all in God’s hands. But Abdullah had a guilty conscience. That was his real reason for seeking me out in private. On his wedding day, he told me, he was walking to Aminah’s house for the ceremony. My brother, being blessed with a handsome face, was used to women and their come-hither looks. And why not? He gave in more than once. On this day a married woman spied him from her window above the street. She became instantly enamored of this handsome groom and cried out for him to lie with her. My brother was no prude, but he was shocked. Her lustful call could be heard up and down the street. Even more shocking, she ran downstairs in her bare feet and approached him in the street, snatching at his scented robes. ‘I must lie with you now, this very minute,’ she pleaded. With difficulty Abdullah tore himself away, and an hour later he was married in Aminah’s house, to great rejoicing.

“Men are only flesh. Even you, a holy man, must admit this, unless God has completely neutered you. That night Abdullah embraced his bride, but the next day at dawn he saw the face of the married woman. She was beautiful, and my brother felt a wave of lust overtake him. He fought it. He almost woke up his bride. Instead, he sneaked out of the house and ran back to the street where the married woman lived. The sun wasn’t yet up. The cobblestones were cool under his feet. ‘I must be crazy,’ he thought. But he threw pebbles at the window shutters, and luckily for him, the woman heard instead of her husband. She stuck her head out and said, ‘What do you want? Can’t honest people sleep without the likes of you coming around, dog?’ Abdullah was astonished at this change of behavior, and not a little offended. As I say, he was used to the attention of women. He threw a rock at her and demanded to know what had changed her mind. ‘Yesterday when you came prancing down the street, you had a light between your eyes,’ she said. ‘It was as bright as a flame at midnight. I wanted that light for my child, but now you have slept with

another, and her child has the blessing. Go away and leave me alone.””

The uncle’s agitation had hardly subsided as he recounted this story. “Abdullah never told that story to anyone but me. Is it true? Has the light been passed to Muhammad?”

There was no need for me to say anything, only to give the slightest nod. For some reason the pain in my heart had lessened. If God was bringing the last prophet, His will be done. It was left for me to pray and count my final days, which I am sure will be few. At least I was safe. The Devil hadn’t been toying with me.

The uncle was anxious to get back to camp. He bowed to me and started down the trail. The horizon was just lighting up with the palest blue, not often seen by towns people but every day by a hermit who rises to pray five times a night. I could make out the faint shape of Abu Talib’s silhouette as he hurried down the stony path beyond the reach of the cooking fire, which had dwindled to embers.

Abu Talib would remember to take special care of the boy. Of that I am certain. That, and one more thing. Muhammad would never forget the water of life.

3

HALIMAH, THE WET NURSE

I knew it was him kneeling beside my bed. I felt the breeze as he brought the fan close to my face. The palm frond made a soft swishing sound. My eyes were swollen shut by the fever, which is why I didn't see him come in.

“Who's the only woman in your life, Muhammad?” I asked.

“You are.”

I smiled through cracked lips. “You're becoming a man if you can lie like that.”

We could talk this way, you see, after so many years. The next thing I felt was a cold dampness. He had brought a bowl of water with him and was pressing a cloth to my eyelids, trying to unseal them. They were gummy and swollen. Only the fan managed to keep the flies away.

“Do you remember how small my breasts were?” I mused.

“Ssh. Drink this.”

Muhammad squeezed the cloth so that drops of water fell on my lips. “What kind of water do you call this?” I grumbled.

“Holy water, from Zamzam.”

I would have spat it back into the bowl if I wasn't dying of fever. There is no holy water in Mecca, I told him, only expensive water. He didn't have the money to waste.

They brought in a doctor with smudge pots last week to beat back the fever. He burned some dung chips and threw fresh herbs on them to create a thick, sweet smoke. That cost

money too. You don't get decent behavior unless you pay, except in the desert.

"Give me my purse," I said. I wanted to pay Muhammad back for the water he squandered his coins on. In his grandfather's day the tribes paid their family for water. Not any more. There had been fierce arguing after "the Slave" died. Now gangs of scowling Qurayshi youths circle the well, holding it hostage until the disputes are settled. Will they ever be?

"Don't worry," said Muhammad, refusing any money. Seeing that I could drink a little, he held the bowl up to my mouth and tipped it. "Between you and me, I saw a pilgrim who had left a half-full jug on a window sill. I stole some of his water."

I tried to laugh in disbelief, but my throat tightened up, and the laugh turned into a croak. "If you stole, then I marched into the Kaaba and ran away with a big black ram." I painted a picture for Muhammad of what the ram and I did when we got home.

"Don't talk like that," he said.

I don't know why I liked to make him blush. Maybe it made me feel more like his mother, poor soul. I reached up to see if his cheek was hot with embarrassment. I felt something else. A beard was coming on. I turned my head away.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

The young never understand the sadness of growing up. They're too busy doing it. At least my eyes were too swollen to show tears. I said, "Do they still let you tease the girls?" That would be forbidden once he had a real beard.

"I don't tease."

"Oh, then you're holier than your precious water."

There was a loud knock on the door, but nobody came in. Only one visitor a day was allowed. Doctor's orders, to keep the contagion from spreading. Muhammad opened the door a

crack, and I heard two male voices. They were impatient. One tried swearing a little. He was just a boy, like Muhammad, but he needed to practice cursing the same way he needed to examine his fuzzy beard every morning to see how it was getting on.

Muhammad had many cousins. At least he enjoyed a scrap of good fortune. I didn't know all their names. His father, the cursed Abdullah, had nine brothers, so there was an army of cousins for him to run with on the streets. That would go on after teasing the girls had ended. Growing up never stops a man from prowling the alleys.

I lifted my hand to my breasts. Of course Muhammad didn't remember how small they were that year. He was barely out of the womb. But it was thanks to small breasts that he came to me.

Fifteen years ago we made our way to town, as the desert tribes do every spring. The men had lambs to sell and the yarn spun by the women over the winter. They gathered around the Kaaba, and the elders, who were trusted with the money, gathered at the inns. They bartered all day, arguing in loud voices. Every once in a while somebody told a joke, and then the tension was relieved by laughter. You hear those filthy jokes all over the world, and the same laughter. Indecency is how men know that they are men.

Women didn't go into the inns, but we had our own business. We sat at the gates of the rich families, holding out our babies and waiting. It was for the milk, you see. City women have babies, but they don't give them the breast. It's not because they're lazy and pampered and don't want sore nipples. They're worried. Living in a city like Mecca, where breathing the air is the same as breathing in contagion, they had to be careful. So every spring we came in from the desert to offer our breasts. That was the custom and still is, although it's on the decline. It's a wonder the air in the city doesn't kill all the babies before they take their first step.

The newborns were put in baskets tied to the sides of the camels, and we took them back to the desert to nurse. In two years time we returned with them, and then the city women, overjoyed to have their children fat and healthy, showered us with coins and gifts. If you ever see a Bedouin woman with silk around her head, you know she's nursed a baby, maybe twins if she is wearing gold earrings.

I had my own boy baby to show them that spring, but times were bad. There had been no rain for months. Everyone's breasts dried up. Mine were half the size they should have been, shrunk like dried dates. I wrapped my robe around myself and held my arms crossed so no one would notice. Who was I fooling? My own baby was shriveled and crying, desperate for the little milk I had. The spoiled rich women walked straight past me without a glance. I spent three days wandering from courtyard to courtyard, without luck. My husband told me to keep trying, but what was the use? We needed the money, of course.

"Muhammad?" I couldn't hear voices at the door and thought he might have slipped out.

"Just here. Don't worry."

He was by my side again. He pushed up my sleeves and began to wash my arms. We kept quiet. For a boy to do that, washing a woman's arms...Some people would have frowned, even if I was his milk-mother.

"Open the shutters. It's too hot. It's like a tomb," I said.

"You know I can't do that. It would ruin everything."

The doctor with the smudge pots said that the room had to be kept closed and hot, to drive the fever out. I knew no better. In my delirium, I couldn't even remember being taken to this room. It was small and close; it smelled foul. But Muhammad had no money. With both his parents gone, and now his uncle Abu Talib, he had no right to any fortune. He took what room they gave him for my sickroom.

I wanted to grumble some more, just to hear his voice, but suddenly I was too exhausted. I let my head loll on the pillow while Muhammad finished my arms.

His mother, Aminah, was the only one who didn't shun me the year of my small breasts. The whole town knew about her. Her husband died in caravan, barely two days away from home. Strangers put him in the ground immediately. She never got to throw herself onto his body. I don't think she would have. Her female cousins gathered at her gate to wail with her, but Aminah was a silent widow. No one had seen such a thing. A two-month bride robbed of the best husband in the city? She had to be in shock, they said.

But Aminah could still think. She knew she was being stalked like soft prey. Fate had fixed its eyes upon her. None of the other Bedouin women would come to her house. She didn't have a brass coin to pay for their breasts.

A shadow appeared over me, and it was Aminah. "I have a new baby. Will you come in?" she said in a soft voice. I was squatting at her gate and was almost asleep from fatigue and thirst.

We drank tea without a word. Why speak? We knew we needed each other. I wouldn't beg, and neither would she.

After a while she said politely, "You're slender."

"In our tribe, Banu Sa'd, we work too hard to get fat. Our men are used to it by now," I replied.

I knew what she meant. I loosened my robe and casually bent over the teapot, pretending to wonder if it had steeped too long. She could see for herself that my breasts didn't hang as fat as they should have.

"May I have two years?" Aminah asked. She had such a small voice, even in her own home. Perhaps she was naturally timid. Or the eyes of fate had broken her.

Two years was the normal time for nursing a baby in the desert. As a precaution I asked to see the baby. She brought it out in swaddling clothes. She said the cloth was soiled and

pulled it away. I saw that the baby, tiny and red as a skinned rabbit, had male parts. You understand?

There is another kind of “mother” who comes to the gates of the rich. It doesn’t matter what her milk is like, because they hand her an infant wrapped in black cloth, its face covered from sight. Women are weak, even in the desert. If you carry a baby away to leave on the mountainside—always a girl baby—seeing its face might soften your heart. But what good would it do to save them? The boys grow up to a hard life, and many will die before they travel on their first caravan. Some will never return. A surplus of virgins and widows is the last thing anyone needs. My husband asked if I would serve as such a “mother.” I told him I’d rather kill myself. We have a daughter ourselves, don’t we?

The contract took only an hour to seal. First I rushed back to camp outside the town walls and got permission from my husband to take the widow’s baby. A very grudging permission.

“After two years you’ll be lucky to get a silver ring out of it,” he said.

“I’m doing this even if I get her cast-off sandals,” I replied.

We argued. I insisted. He frowned, but what can you do? We’d get nothing if I left without a baby.

After Aminah had cried a little, the Banu Sa’d passed the city walls at twilight, heading for the open desert. I don’t know how sailors feel when they smell the sea again, but it must be like how I feel when I can smell the desert. A funny expression, for in truth you can’t smell anything. When the last whiff of rancid smoke, sewage, and dung is out of your nostrils, you are in the desert, where the life is as pure as the air. For the next two years Muhammad never smelled corruption, or saw a house wall for that matter.

MY BREASTS SWELLED when I began to nurse the new baby. The other women became jealous. They spread rumors that I

was feeding him camel's milk. I cornered the worst shrew and showed her my breast.

“See? It got big on its own,” I told her and made clear what I would do if she kept up her accusations. The next thing you know, they'll say I made a pact with demons. How could I tell them that it was the baby who brought me so much milk? The udders of the goats and camels also swelled, but no one would believe me if I told them. Milk in the middle of a drought. Who can say why?

“I must go,” Muhammad said.

His voice brought me back from my fever dreams. I didn't know how long I had slept. The blackness in that horrible little room was the same, day or night.

Muhammad put his hand on my brow. “Lie still. I won't be long. What can I bring you?”

“Bring me the stars,” I mumbled.

Which sounds like I was delirious, but he smiled. Any Bedouin would.

One morning soon after, Muhammad found me sitting up in bed, and when he felt my brow, it was cool and dry. The first thing I wanted wasn't food, even though I was starving. I wanted to be carried outside. Muhammad fetched two of his cousins, and they carried my bed into a dirty courtyard shaded by palm trees. I was puzzled. Why hadn't my people come to carry me?

“The contagion is worse. They had to leave,” said Muhammad soberly.

I asked how bad it was. He said people were dying too fast to be buried. The tribes were stacking up corpses outside the city walls. So it was right for my people to flee. They had no reason to lose their lives waiting to see if mine might be saved. Muhammad had girl cousins too, and they brought me millet gruel with lamb in it for strength. They were pretty girls, and gossips. Their chatter was meant to cheer me up, but I sent

them away. I didn't need cheering. Hearing the wind in the palms was better than a chorus of blessed spirits.

We Bedouin are proud, but not so proud that we are immune to money. Sometimes foreign traders will ride into camp on half-dead horses. They empty their purses for a goatskin of water and a guide to the next oasis. Most foreigners foolish enough to cross the desert without a Bedouin don't make it to an encampment. We find their remains bleaching on the dunes.

The first time Muhammad saw such a sight he was no more than five. It shocked him. A man's body splayed out on the sand, his skin already turning to parchment, and his horse a hundred feet away, as dead as he was. The wind was mild that day. It had filled their mouths with sand, but not yet covered their bodies.

"There's a fool," I said. "Letting his horse loose. Who would do that?"

"He wanted to be nice," said Muhammad innocently.

I knelt down and looked him in the eye. "No horse can survive on its own out here. What he should have done is kill the horse and climb inside its belly. That way he would have been protected for a day or two." I knew what I was talking about. The Banu Sa'd were close by. We would have seen the vultures circling over the dead animal and come to see. Even after three days a man might be found alive inside a horse or camel. He wouldn't be a pretty sight, but death is much uglier.

Muhammad listened, but his eyes kept wandering to the dead man, whose mouth had gasped open in his last moments, leaving a hole for the sand to fill. You could see the boy wanted to ask me something, but he didn't. I understood. Fate was a tease. Young as he was, he had experienced how cruel a tease. So had his mother. At the end of two years I brought her baby back. Aminah was waiting by the gate and let loose a cry of joy when she saw us coming. Muhammad was walking on sturdy little legs by my side. Bedouin babies don't start to

walk when they want to. They start as soon as they have to, which is very early among nomads.

Hearing her cry, Muhammad drew back. He had been taught that this was a sign of danger. The camp is under attack when women sound the alarm. And he didn't know her, of course. To him, I was his mother. I bent down and slapped him hard across the face.

"Go to her. Forget me," I said. "I hate you like a stranger." We always use the same harsh words when giving a baby back. Muhammad didn't move or even cry. He had to be hit a second time before he ran toward Aminah, who was crouching in the street now, arms open wide. But their reunion was a tease. Mecca had been infected with a plague, and when the first neighbor died on Aminah's street, she covered her face with a veil into which bitter herbs were knotted. She veiled her baby's face too, but this was a futile precaution. She knew fate wasn't done with her. In tears she returned Muhammad to me. Contagion blows from house to house faster than dust, so there was little time to consider.

"When should I bring him back?" I asked. I was rushing back to the same camp where the Banu Sa'd always stay, only now it was dangerously close to town. Aminah ran beside me, holding Muhammad in her arms. He couldn't run fast enough to keep up, and she couldn't bear parting from him so soon, after only a day.

I asked again. "Two months, three?" It was up to her.

"Three years. Keep him as long as you can," Aminah said.

I won't lie. I was shocked. "But the plague will be gone once the weak are all dead. It won't take nearly that long, perhaps by winter."

She wasn't listening. She thrust her baby into my arms and ran away, not looking back. Which wasn't heartless, as you might think. She knew what fate was like. It was like a wasp covered in honey. You cannot taste the sweetness without a sting.

That was why the boy grew up to be five among the nomads and saw his first corpse in the sand dunes. Foreigners had other uses besides dying on us, which could be very useful if their horses were still alive and their purses full of coins. Muhammad learned about respect from the eyes of strangers. Not just the ones from outside Arabia, who were forced to show respect unless they wanted to wake up one morning in the desert to find that their guide had disappeared in the night. City Arabs move freely back and forth between the city and the wild. The young men in particular are never more than half tamed by life in town. Since childhood they have heard about falcon hunting and sneak attacks on the tents of the enemy. Young men want glory, and they sneak away into the desert as soon as they can.

Muhammad met many of them from his tribe, the Quraysh, who were the proudest of all, since they were used to power and money in Mecca. It took only a few days to strip their pride. It wasn't done through humiliation or mischief (although no one strongly objected to handing them a blanket full of sand fleas to wrap themselves in at night—a few hundred pink bites is a healthy reminder of how things are). What won their respect was something you'd never suspect: words. The young men come with mouths as filthy as the bottoms of their feet. A few can read, but all know the magic of words, and there is no purer magic than the words of the Bedouin.

We are the living chronicle of every Arab hero and god. Our minds are soaked in poetry the way a wineskin is soaked with juice. Their first night sitting around the fire, the young men are shivering with cold—they never come dressed for the chill that descends after the sun sinks—and exchanging filthy anecdotes to keep warm. No one rebukes them. A Banu Sa'd elder will softly begin to sing one of the songs about a great raid in which our ancestors stole a hundred camels. A second man will join in once he recognizes the tune, then a third. In a few moments the whole tribe is singing, and the young men's jaws drop. It's not the melody or the exploit being praised that

moves them, but the strength of every voice singing as one, and in such beautiful, pure Arabic as these corrupt young dandies have never heard in their whole lives.

You think you know what comes next. I will praise Muhammad for being the best singer or the youngest or the most precocious. I will paint a picture of the day he stood up and astonished the men by singing a song he had only heard once, not getting a syllable wrong. In fact, Muhammad almost never sang, except in a low voice no one could hear. When we were blessed by a wandering bard and laid a feast before him in order to hear his epics of massacred Christians and enemy armies drowned in sand overnight, Muhammad sat on the edge of the assembly or even sneaked away. I had to protect him from suspicion that he had blood that wasn't Arab in his veins. Without verse and song, what is an Arab?

No use worrying about that. I was anxious that fate would never let him see his mother again. But after three years they were reunited again. She was waiting by the gate, just as before. She crouched in the street with her arms spread wide. Only this time she didn't cry out, and I didn't slap Muhammad to make him run to her. He was old enough to be told what his situation was. When he set eyes on Aminah, he was prepared for this strange woman who must be called mother. He didn't kiss me, but only gave a grave little bow and walked slowly into her arms.

Aminah brought me inside. She was poorer than ever, but she had cakes and tea waiting for me, and two girls in bangles who did a dance in my honor (they had been coached to run off as soon as they were done, not staying for a share of cake and tea). She placed a small sandalwood box on the table between us. When I opened it, I saw all the jewelry she possessed in the world. One was a single pearl as large as my thumb, which I knew she had brought with her in her dowry when she arrived in the house of Abdullah.

Aminah saw that I was about to protest. She drew Muhammad close and wrapped her skirt around him. "You

take it. Now I have a richer pearl,” she said. She was a woman, but she had the Arab way with words.

I spent the night in a featherbed covered with a silk spread, once beautiful, now worn almost threadbare. I couldn't sleep, because my mind kept thrashing a memory over. Aminah was eager to know everything about her son, and we had spent the evening in one-sided talk, as I recounted everything he had learned among the Banu Sa'd. But fear forced me to lie. I withheld the one thing she had to be told.

The thing happened when he was three. One day I was scrubbing out a copper pot with sand when my own child, a boy little older than Muhammad, ran into the tent.

“Two men are killing my brother!” he cried.

He was too breathless and frightened to say more. I raised a cry and ran out into the desert, following the tracks my boy had left. A few men heard my distress and joined me. That morning Muhammad had wandered off. We covered a long distance before I spotted him lying in the sand near a thornbush. My heart pounded. I rushed to his side. He was alive, but very weak.

“Run after them! They tried to kill him!” I cried, but the men didn't move. They were bewildered. There was no blood on the boy's body and no wounds. Looking around, you couldn't see tracks leading anywhere. Nobody called my son a liar. We have a good position, and they wouldn't dare. I swept Muhammad up in my arms, grateful that he hadn't gotten lost. Somehow the string that tied him to one of the girls must have broken.

I scolded my boy, and his father threatened to beat him for lying, but he never changed his story. He had followed Muhammad out into the desert when he saw the broken string. The footprints were easy to track. When he came over a rise, he saw two strangers bent over Muhammad, who was lying on his back just as we found him. The two had long knives, and while one kept the boy pinned with his knee, the other plunged his blade into Muhammad's chest. If they noticed that they

were being observed, they didn't turn their heads. The one reached into Muhammad's chest and did something. My boy couldn't tell what; he was barely six himself. The sight so frightened him that he watched for only a minute before running back to camp.

The tale was not incredible to everyone. *Jinns* roam the desert thirsting for human souls. That was the strongest possibility. I had my doubts, though. *Jinns* attack at night, and they don't need knives to pluck out your soul. They have dark enchantment. Not that anyone has survived to say what that enchantment is. I feared Muhammad would be shunned for drawing two demons so close to camp in broad daylight. In fact, the opposite happened. The fact that he had survived their attack was considered to be a sign of stronger magic than that of the *jinns*. It was decided that Muhammad's name would be added to the songs about our ancestors who had driven off *jinns*. After that, his reputation was made. Besides, it was obvious he hadn't had his soul sucked out.

I couldn't tell Aminah this, and since Muhammad was so young, there was no fear that he would let it slip. I took the sandalwood box and departed the next morning after first tucking the pearl under Aminah's pillow. Everything in the box would have vanished anyway, once she fell sick and doctors had to be paid. In the few years she had left, I would have been welcome in her house, but I never went back. Muhammad had spent enough time with a mother who wasn't real. Now he needed time with a mother who would be real such a short time. Aminah was like a shadow passing through his life.

WHEN HE WAS sure that I had regained my strength, Muhammad led me from my sickroom to the edge of town. Mecca is too green to see the desert from, even atop the highest watchtower. He fussed over my bags when the small train of donkeys and camels arrived to take me home. I let him. Why not? A hundred cousins aren't the same as a milk-

mother. My few things were packed into saddlebags. The Banu Sa'd men who came for me were old ones who could be spared, and they hated the city. The circling hills shut out too much of the sky. In haste I was laid on a stretcher behind the last camel, since I was too weak to make the journey on foot. The last thing I felt wasn't love for Muhammad, but a twinge of curiosity.

"Do you remember one day in the desert, when you were very young and got lost?" I asked.

He nodded. "But I wasn't lost. I had a feeling where I should go. Two men were waiting for me when I got there."

I was amazed. "They attacked you, and you never told me? After we got you home, you wouldn't say a word."

"I couldn't. I knew you thought the *jinns* had captured me."

"It had to be *jinns*. They left no footprints. They were seen ripping open your chest."

"I wondered why everyone whispered behind my back. But it wasn't *jinns*. Other beings live in the desert. You should know that."

If it had been anyone else putting me in my place, my nails would have been at his face. But with him I felt a mixture of meekness and wonder. "What kind of beings?" I asked in a small voice.

A strange smile crossed Muhammad's face. "I've never stopped asking that question. You came running in such a panic, you scared them off." He put a finger lightly on his heart. "Don't worry. Whatever they wanted to do, it's done."

4

WARAQAH, THE BELIEVER

The best hiding place is inside your own heart. I've tried all the others. Even when I dug a hole by the open latrines and covered it with thatch, they dragged me out and beat me. I was young then, and they were thugs. A hideous idol with a serpent's tail had been found smashed to bits outside the Kaaba. It was probably one of them, getting drunk and daring one another. But I was easier to blame.

I only wanted to be alone so I could think about God. How did that hurt anyone? But loneliness is the seeker's affliction. It drove me to wander in the marketplace. I was overheard muttering to myself. *Allah, endow my heart with wings, so that I may fly to the garden of eternity.* I meant it as a prayer, but they took it as sacrilege.

One time a scrap of writing fell out of my pocket. Some Qurayshi roughs picked it up, and a wandering scribe recited it aloud: "The veil between God and his servant does not exist in heaven or on earth. It exists in himself." I couldn't dig a hole deep enough to hide that kind of blasphemy.

Eventually I saved my skin by getting rich. Money is protection against persecution. Not perfect protection. If looks could kill, the Qurayshi youth who prowl the streets would send me to a shallow grave every day of the week and twice on feast days.

I straighten my spine and walk past them eyes ahead. Once I reach the inns by the Kaaba, my identity changes. I'm no longer "the believer" who cannot enter a house for dinner without the rooms being disinfected with musk after he leaves.

I turn into a well-padded merchant whose shameful ideas are insignificant, once you hear the clink of gold in his purse.

“Waraqah ibn Nawfal, you are most welcome.”

“Waraqah, my brother, sit here next to me.”

“Waraqah, blessed by the gods, make me happy by sharing this wine.”

I never trusted any of them, and yet one time I let my guard down. My only excuse is gathering age. I took one of the Quraysh aside, a young man who stood out for being slightly more thoughtful than his peers. I unfolded a parchment before his eyes. It was wrinkled and yellow; it had been clumsily mended in several places.

“What do you think of this?” I asked.

The young man was barely literate, but he looked impressed. “Your will?” he guessed. He was an old camel trader’s son, not yet twenty. He probably dreamed about his inheritance every spare moment.

I smiled. “It’s more precious than my will. It’s a page from the Bible. I’ve been translating it.”

His eyes widened. “Better be careful,” he warned. I had pushed the page toward him, but he backed away as if I were offering him a hot coal.

It was comical, really. Everyone knows that such pages exist. A merchant whose route passes through the tiny communities of Jews and Christians may buy or sell an occasional tattered leaf from their jumbled scriptures. But we Arabs pretend that these communities have not sprung up in our midst. It would be like admitting a growth of black smut in your bags of wheat.

I reverently kissed the parchment. “It tells of Abraham and Isaac. You should let me recite the story to you sometime. There’s almost a murder in it. You like knives, don’t you?” I was toying with the young man, who looked relieved when I

folded the scrap and thrust it back into my robe. I was lucky. He could have led a move against me.

What does “the believer” believe? No one ever asks me to my face. They only know that the idols are good business, and anyone who speaks out against them threatens everybody’s income. “Listen to reason, my dear Waraqah,” they say. “We will shrivel like a barren womb. Mecca will die without the pilgrims. You see how much they spend.”

It’s true. You can get money out of a pilgrim simply for letting him set eyes on a golden idol. They spend even more during the Hajj, when hundreds flood Mecca to run the circle around the Kaaba. No one knows when that started, but now it’s a fixed tradition.

I am approaching Muhammad, my spiritual son, in this roundabout way, because that is how he approached me.

One day, it was a dozen years ago, I was sitting in my courtyard. I was expecting a messenger momentarily and left the gate open. A little boy wandered inside. We looked at each other. I asked where his mother was, but he didn’t reply. He gazed at me shyly. From his dress I saw that he must be a nomad. They are fierce about keeping their children close by.

I went over and crouched in front of him. “Do you know me?” I asked. I had the strangest feeling.

He shook his head. “I don’t know you, but I hear your voice.”

Well, of course he did. I had just spoken to him. But the boy didn’t mean that. He turned and pointed past the gate. “I was playing by the well, and I heard you. What do you want?”

If he meant Zamzam, it was ten streets away. “I don’t want anything from you,” I said, feeling very queer talking this way to a five-or six-year-old.

“Then I must want from you,” he said.

Before I could question him, one of those Qurayshi toughs was at my gate. He didn’t dare come through it, but he started

yelling. “Hey, hey, he’s here. I found him.”

A second later two of his fellows ran up and behind them a Banu Sa’d woman, red-faced and puffing. “Muhammad!” she cried and rushed into the courtyard to sweep him up. Immediately she realized her discourtesy and began spewing apologies, tangled with a disjointed tale about bringing the boy back to his mother, who hadn’t seen him in three years. I didn’t care. I assured her that her infraction was nothing. I escorted her back to the gate, glaring at the Qurayshi roughnecks, who lingered in case I gave them a coin. If I didn’t, they’d shake down the poor woman, so I slipped them the smallest piece of silver I had. Why not? God sees every good deed.

A tiny incident, but it preyed on my mind. Muhammad had wandered away from his wet nurse when her back was turned and headed straight for my gate.

Under my bed I have many pages of the Bible stashed away. It’s my habit to pull one out late at night and translate a few passages into Arabic. I also have another ritual that I keep to myself, for good reason. When I am puzzled over a mystery, large or small, I pull a sheet out at random, and whatever my eye falls upon I take to be a message. A few days after the boy appeared, I reached under the mattress and took out the first page my fingers touched. I shut my eyes and pointed to a passage at random, then took it over to the lamp to read:

Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son,

And his name shall be called Emmanuel.

These were not meaningless words. The man who sold me this particular page was a Christian beggar who followed my caravan many years ago. I threw him some bread, and as he wolfed it down he told me about his savior. He felt blessed, even though he lived in the gutter and fought with stray dogs over garbage.

The year the beggar sold me this scrap of scripture he had a terrible cough. He knew he wasn’t long for this world. This

page from the Bible was precious to him, and the beggar wanted the message of his Messiah carried forward.

So I knew that the virgin had conceived, and Emmanuel had come. It happened long ago, and the only reason to keep the page was to remind me of how the beggar's face glowed when he spoke about his savior. Why, then, had my finger landed on this verse?

Several years passed before a Jew came to Mecca whom I could trust. He plied gold and silver trinkets. His trade was so valuable that he bought his way out of the law that kept Jews from entering Mecca. I gave him wine and showed him the passage. The name Emmanuel brought a crooked smile to his face.

“Don't trust your beggar,” he said. “What kind of a savior would allow someone to live like that?”

The messiah is yet to come, he said, to kill the enemies of the Jews and save them all. I was too impatient to wait that long, I told him. In Arabia, idols can save you today, if you're gullible enough. I pressed the Jew for an explanation that meant something real. More than a bit exasperated, he said that for my understanding “Emmanuel” meant the “king of prophets.”

Ah, well, that was a different story.

Arabs put great store in prophets. If God pointed to the word “prophet” when I asked about Muhammad, something must be afoot. In Mecca some of the ignorant call me “the Jew,” but that's just their crude way of insulting a servant of God. I have no religion. I am *hanif*, a believer without a faith, like a lone palm tree without an oasis.

I did not approach Muhammad the whole time he was growing up. That was far too risky. I watched from afar. Old Muttalib, his grandfather, was still alive then. It was a tragedy that he had survived his youngest son, Abdullah, but he found solace in Muhammad. He would take the boy to the inns and prop him on his knee while holding forth. Muttalib had gotten

too old for trading. He was half blind and growing weaker by the month. It was a common sight, he and the boy, who kept his eyes on the ground. No one had ever seen a child who wanted to keep to himself so much. But Muhammad was obedient, and when Muttalib wanted to show him off, he would stand up like a man, even in front of half a dozen drunk Quraysh in a dingy, smoky wine house.

Then a peculiar thing happened. Many years later I was out walking and happened to see a figure crouched in an alley. The light was dim, but I made out Muhammad squatting on his heels. I nodded. He put his fingers to his lips and pointed at something on the ground. A mouse. The creature had been lured out into the open with a few grains of wheat.

Then Muhammad gazed up at the sky, where a black speck hovered. My eyes were failing, but I knew it was a hawk. Muhammad looked back at the mouse, then at the hawk again.

“It has no idea of the danger,” he said.

“Neither do we,” I replied.

You see the point? Like the mouse innocently eating its seeds, we go about our lives not realizing that death is watching us from afar, constantly stalking. Those were Muhammad’s inner thoughts. Why had he shared them with me? Our voices made the mouse scurry back into its hole. Muhammad stood up and walked toward me.

“I’m a man now,” he said. “We can talk.”

“A man? You’re seventeen,” I smiled.

He didn’t smile back. “Old enough to defend myself, if anyone catches us talking like this.”

That’s how it started. I never brought up the day his nurse lost him and he wandered into my courtyard, but he must have remembered. What kind of patience does it take to wait twelve years before speaking to someone again? He began coming to my house for tea and God. Only tea at first, because God remained a forbidden subject until later.

Naturally, he wanted to know about me. “What is a *hanif*?” he asked.

“One who believes in Allah, one who scorns idols and waits for the light to descend,” I said.

He nodded gravely. “Everyone says you’re different, but you look ordinary to me.”

Muhammad said this frankly and without apology, considering he was insulting an elder. I answered with a quote from one of my hidden books. “A man goes in and out among the people. He eats and sleeps with them. He buys and sells in the marketplace. This everyone can see. What they cannot see is that he never forgets God for a single instant.”

“Are you that man?” asked Muhammad.

“I will be, when I become a saint. For now, I can only try.”

“Why is one god better than many?” he asked.

I answered with another question. “Why is one faithful wife better than many whores?”

“What makes you call the gods whores?”

“In both cases you pay your money and get your wish. Only a whore is more reliable and trustworthy. Most idols take your money and give nothing in return,” I replied.

Muhammad seemed pleased that I spoke so freely. As for myself, I often had to conceal a burning excitement that agitated me every time I set eyes on him. How could I explain it? It was impossible. I would lose all respect. A grown man trembling like a bride waiting in the dark for her bridegroom.

We talked about everything, endlessly. Yet I could never draw Muhammad out about his own beliefs. This was a cause for concern. In Arabia, one belief swallows up every other: the tribe. The tribe tells you where you belong on earth. The tribe runs to defend you after you knife a stranger for spitting on your sandals. Like a monster with a thousand heads, the tribe sees everything and can eat whom it pleases. There is no room

for belief in anything else, including God. God is just another thing for the monster to devour.

One day I'd had enough. I turned on Muhammad. "Talking to you is like talking to a respectful oyster. Open up. Who are you?"

He didn't look startled. "I am one who selects friends carefully."

An angel must have seen my impatience, because at that moment he brought me the perfect response. It was from an old verse. "I have a friend, and he fills my cup with wine that has no equal."

Muhammad blushed. "You have been such a friend to me."

After that, our bond was sealed. We became bold enough that we'd talk in public, late at night after everyone else had stumbled home. I was always eager for his company.

Word soon shot around town that he was my protégé. Just in case anyone took that amiss, I spread my money around more generously. I even sent a messenger boy to buy a calf and sacrifice it outside the Kaaba during the spring rites. He took my money and an hour later came racing back.

"Which god is it for?" the boy asked. "They want to know."

"The one whose only name is 'the One,'" I said. The boy looked confused, so I said, "The choice is theirs. Just make a good show of it." He ran away still confused. No matter. I was used to being unfathomable.

Muhammad was balm to my soul. I had someone to hold in a spiritual embrace. The affliction of loneliness was lifted. But what good was I doing for him? I could always leave him my money. Mecca would have a second rich outcast. There had to be something else.

"Are there other *hanif*?" he asked me one day.

"You mean others who know better how to keep their mouths shut?"

He smiled. "I was thinking of those who might have a taste for wisdom."

"Wisdom is like hot coals," I said. "People enjoy the glow, but they're not stupid enough to step in."

It was the most cynical thing I'd ever said, and his face fell.

"You make me talk like a whore," I murmured, and Muhammad knew it was an apology. We both knew I wasn't ashamed to be a believer. But I never took him to meet another *hanif*. It was contradictory. Two *hanif* make a congregation, three a tribe, and four a faith to be defended against other faiths with arrows and spears. Each *hanif* travels alone, I told him, and it seemed that Muhammad was satisfied with that explanation.

Something gnawed at me, though. I pondered a long time, until I convinced myself that he needed to know about the verse my finger had lighted upon. *And he shall be called Emmanuel*. If I didn't tell him, I would be hiding a great secret from him. The only way to bring up the subject was indirectly. One blazing afternoon we were lying in the courtyard on straw pallets that had been soaked down with water.

Muhammad raised himself up on his elbows. "What is it?"

I faced him. "What do you know about how your father died?"

For once the cautious youth looked startled. "I know he went on a journey and never returned."

"There's more," I said. "Much more."

Muhammad hesitated. He didn't want his memories disturbed, I could tell.

"They aren't your memories," I said. "You never met him. He's like water that someone else has drunk."

"But he was loved," said Muhammad.

That much was undeniable. From the day he was born, Abdullah had led a charmed life. Everyone said so, and that made it so. He was never insulted in the street by a reckless young tough or called out to a fight. He basked in the illusion that he was the first person ever to be loved.

“He wanted to be a hero,” I began. “A man who spoke like thunder and laughed like the sunrise. I knew him and saw what his imagination was like. He loved the Bedouin, and he envisioned himself in one of their legends.” I eyed Muhammad sharply. “Do you know why your father failed?”

“Because he died.”

“No. Because it was not God’s will.”

Then and there I unfolded the twisted whole story of Abdullah’s death, which had been carefully kept from his son.

Everything revolved around Zamzam. The joy that Abdul Muttalib felt when he rediscovered the well was short-lived. He became entangled in Qurayshi intrigues. He was resented for grabbing the rights to the sacred water, and in time Muttalib felt that his enemies would prevail. What he needed was ten strong sons, or so he convinced himself. But the gods had favored him so far with only one.

He spent his days and nights chewing over his obsession, until the situation took a desperate turn. Muttalib went to the Kaaba and gazed at the hundreds of idols that lined the chamber. All at once he believed in none of them. In despair he called on God instead. Deep inside every Arab is an ancestral memory of Allah. It was Allah, the one God, who had led Hagar and Ishmael, the very founders of the Arab race, to Mecca.

Muttalib had never considered Allah reliable enough. The creator of the world had lost interest in his creation. Why else did ill fortune and calamities befall his children? But Muttalib had to have those ten sons, and it was in God’s power to grant them. Muttalib knew nothing of Jewish or Christian beliefs. He knew, however, that every god loved sacrifices in his name.

The greatest of the gods would require the greatest sacrifice, he reasoned. Muttalib raised his arms to heaven and promised the most dreadful sacrifice possible, if only he was granted the blessing of ten strong sons to defend him from his enemies.

A decade passed. One after another Muttalib's wives bore him healthy, well-formed sons, until the number reached ten. He was well satisfied, and his peace of mind was all the more profound, because he had forgotten his oath to Allah long ago.

But God can reach into any man's heart. One day while walking to the Kaaba, where the most revered idol was Hubal, the moon god, Muttalib had a vision in bloody detail of his promised sacrifice. He had sworn an oath to give God back one of his sons if he was granted ten. Muttalib was horrified by the picture of himself cutting the throat of one of his precious sons, but the thought of renegeing on his promise to God was more horrifying.

He called his sons together and told them that one must die the very next day. But which one? The room fell silent. The sons were as superstitious as the father. They knew the oath had to be carried out. The next day they all gathered inside the Kaaba beside the statue of Hubal. Muttalib believed that if his sons drew lots, Hubal had enough power to select the right one. As you can see, Muttalib was fickle. One day he shivered before the might of God, but when it came to practical affairs, throwing the choice onto an idol's shoulders was easier. He had been paying off Hubal for years.

The sons each wrote their name on an arrowhead and threw the arrows into a quiver. Muttalib reached in and, begging Hubal for guidance, pulled one out. The name on it was Abdullah's. The other nine sons, needless to say, were relieved, yet no one expected that Muttalib's favorite son would ever be drawn. When the news was announced outside the Kaaba, the gathered crowd began to shout, demanding Muttalib to foreswear his oath. The wife who had borne Abdullah was named Fatimah. She was popular with the common folk, and most of the crowd came from her clan.

Muttalib heard the vociferous protestations with a heart of stone. He had picked a spot between two large idols where he would shed Abdullah's blood. With his unsheathed knife he made his way through the mob. Abdullah followed, white as a ghost. Hands plucked at garments; cries filled the air.

Pardon me if this tragic moment suddenly turns comic, but at the last minute a voice in the crowd shouted, "The gods love money. Pay them off. You can afford it."

Muttalib whirled around in a rage, trying to spot the one who had cried out so insolently. But a tiny voice in his head whispered, *It's not such a bad idea. You're rich, and you love Abdullah more than anyone else in the world.*

With a great show of reluctance Muttalib agreed to spare Abdullah, but there were two details to settle, for now this had turned into haggling. How much should be paid to ransom his son, and who should decide that the price was fair? Since Fatimah's clan had raised such a ruckus, Muttalib forced them to add their money to his. As for an arbiter, it was decided to seek the advice of Shiya, a woman soothsayer who was the most trusted among the various shamans, fortune tellers, astrologers, oracles, and diviners trusted by the Quraysh.

Shiya was a recluse living in the faraway town of Yathrib. The journey had its perils, and Yathrib was traditionally a rival to Mecca in prestige and power. Even so, Muttalib made the trip with a light heart, overjoyed to circumvent his bargain with Allah. It wasn't a good sign that Shiya had just left town when he arrived, but Muttalib brushed this omen off. He traveled a hundred miles north before he found her, an old crone shuttered inside a hovel. She refused him entrance, but after two days of his wheedling Shiya promised to divine an answer.

Her answer was this: "In your tribe, Abdul Muttalib, if a man kills another man, the victim's life is worth ten camels, which are paid to his family. Payment in camels will satisfy the gods in this case too."

Muttalib had his doubts that Allah could be bribed with ten camels, but before he could object, Shiya stopped him. “Take two arrows and go before Hubal again. On one arrow write ‘Abdullah’ and on the other, ‘camels.’ Draw out the arrows as you did before, and every time your son’s name comes up, add ten more camels to the price. Do this until the word ‘camel’ is drawn, and you’ll have the price the gods demand.”

Muttalib and his companions returned to Mecca, and a great crowd gathered for the drawing, laughing and carousing as if this were a feast day. The first arrow that Muttalib drew had Abdullah’s name on it, so the price was ten camels. He drew again. Abdullah’s name appeared. The price was now twenty camels. The crowd’s cheerful banter turned to silence and finally grim-faced awe. Abdullah’s name was drawn ten times in a row. The price was a hundred camels, almost the wealth of a well-to-do trader. Muttalib was richer than that, but he blanched.

At last the word “camel” came up on the eleventh try, but by then Muttalib was dejected and overwhelmed with doubts. He stood up before the crowd and raised his hands.

“Draw again,” he cried. “If Abdullah’s name comes up three times in a row, I will obey the soothsayer. If not, my duty to God forces me to keep my bargain.”

This was terrible news to Fatimah’s clan and to Abdullah, of course, who let drop a cup of wine he had raised to his lips.

Despite the hue and cry and the horror on Abdullah’s face, Muttalib stood firm. All along he had mistrusted Shiya, suspecting that she might be toying with him because her allegiance was to the tribes of Yathrib.

The arrows were drawn again. One, two, three. An exultant cry rose up from the crowd, because Abdullah’s name had appeared on all three draws. His life was spared, and his father paid a hundred camels to the priests at the Kaaba in the name of Hubal.

When I reached this point in my tale, I glanced at Muhammad, who had grown very still. No one had recounted these details to him, and he was steeling himself, since he already knew that his father's reprieve led to no happy ending.

I went on. To celebrate his escape from death, Abdullah was allowed to marry, and at age twenty-five he took Aminah, the daughter of a prominent family in Mecca. They spent three days ensconced in her father's house after the wedding ceremony. But Muttalib had been harboring dark thoughts amid the celebrations. He called Abdullah to him and told him that he should travel by caravan to Syria. The young bridegroom was baffled. Why should he leave? He had only been married a week. The young couple were enjoying the first sweet taste of their love.

Muttalib gave no reasons. He forced his will upon Abdullah, as was his right as the young man's father. With tears and rending cries Aminah ran to the gate clutching Abdullah's robe as he left for Syria. They had been together as man and wife for only two weeks. Abdullah knew that his father was daring God to harm him. It was the old man's way of testing if he had truly fulfilled his oath to Allah. That, and Muttalib's fear that Abdullah's happiness was too great. Between having his life saved and his bliss with Aminah, Abdullah was tempting the gods to destroy him.

"And they did," said Muhammad interrupting.

Abdullah never made it back home. The trading in Syria went well, but his yearning to be back with his bride was strong. Retracing his steps, he passed through Yathrib. There, where Shiya had saved him from fate, Abdullah fell ill with a malady no healer could treat. He died a few days later and was quickly buried, in case his curse happened to be contagious.

"I don't tell you all this to add to your sorrows," I said. "You had to know these things. Abdullah had a sixth sense. He knew that God's will cannot be bargained with. Just as we accept life from Allah, so must we accept death, as a gift that is not ours to question."

Muhammad hadn't waited for the end of my tale before springing to his feet. He began to pace restlessly. "You want to curse my whole family? You might as well with this tale."

A voice told me to keep quiet. Nothing hurt more than Muhammad's anger. Yet stinging words poured from my lips. "This has nothing to do with me. Your mother took you on a trip when you were six. Where? To that same town, Yathrib. She died on the way home, just like her husband. Open your eyes. See the will of God. Accept it."

Muhammad remained silent, but his eyes told a story of defiance.

I continued. "My son, you are fated. I have prayed over you, and God has prepared you for greatness. A great man learns through calamity. It fixes his gaze on heaven, if he is wise."

The color rose in Muhammad's cheeks. "You made my father and his father out to be mere dreamers."

"Sometimes dreamers see more than ordinary people," I replied. "Abdullah fled his young bride even though it broke her heart. He ushered himself off the scene before it was done for him."

I had gone too far. Another youth might have tightened his fists and started swearing. Muhammad stopped pacing and gazed at me. I put my hand on his shoulder to calm him.

"I'm saying that all men must die, but some may go to their deaths willingly as a sacrifice. In that way they become true servants of God. We never know the truth until it is revealed."

Muhammad pulled away. He was too upset to listen and ran toward the courtyard gate. I didn't call after him. Without using the word "prophet," I had opened the possibility of a special fate. Muhammad didn't return the next day, or the day after that. He avoided contact, only nodding at me if our paths happened to cross at the inns or near the Kaaba. His gaze was

strangely guilty. It would be months before he relented and asked to see me again.

The night I revealed Muhammad's destiny to him I couldn't sleep. I pulled out a page from my hidden cache and pointed a finger in the dark. When I brought it close to the lamp, the words beneath my finger brought consolation.

For strait is the gate, and narrow is the way that leads to life, and few there be who find it.

5

BARAKAH, THE AFRICAN SLAVE

I don't know if hell has three circles, but Mecca does. The first ring is where the rich live, the second is for those who dream of getting rich, and the third is for the dregs, who wait upon the first two. I live in the worst, the farthest circle away from God. All around me, desperation is a way of life. In a drought I've seen children squat to sip from the sewer. The rich would rather kiss a leper than come to the filthy alleys where our crumbling hovels stand. They crowd around the Kaaba, their mansions and courtyards shouldering each other aside like old women grabbing for peaches in the bazaar.

Is my head less blessed, because it's not covered with silk?

"Barakah, I trust you. You're the only one I trust," says Muhammad.

He comes to see me. That's proof that he's not rich yet. Ever since old Muttalib died, their clan has fallen. Slaves found themselves thrown out on the street, begging for a master to feed them. It's shocking how the vultures closed in, stripping the Hashim of power, forcing them into humiliation. Muhammad did what he had to. He began to trade his small fund, and that has served him well. I never thought he'd reach twenty without begging for help.

His visits to me aren't planned. He drops in on hell when the mood strikes him. God seal my mouth for saying such things. He loves me—that's the real reason. I was the first person to hold him when he was born. I belonged to his mother, the lady Aminah, in those days. I've been passed along so many times I couldn't name all my owners. I'm like a water skin that won't be thrown out until it leaks its life away.

One day I look up from sweeping the blown dirt and leaves from my last master's courtyard, and I see an amazing sight. Muhammad leading a caravan, and so young. An older merchant weary of travel trusted him to go in his place. When he spots me from atop his camel, he gives me a serious nod. I know Muhammad wants to dismount and embrace me, but he can't, not in front of men he gives orders to. In the back of my mind I think, *Your father never returned, your mother never returned. Maybe the curse ended with them.*

And he did return. Word spread that Muhammad could be trusted to keep his head in dangerous corners. He will soon have the money to buy me for himself.

"Money?" I laugh. "No master will give me shelter anymore. You can have me for free."

Muhammad winces, but we both know what is lacking. He first needs a wife. A female slave in a single man's house is scandalous. Everyone would know what she's really there for. Gossips would say that he likes them old.

"How did you become so respectable?" I tease Muhammad.

"Don't worry. It's a disguise," he jokes back. Walking past him in the street, you see Muhammad's hair and beard cut like those of someone who's prosperous. He wears a cloak dyed in rich blue and trimmed with braid. Only I know what he is. He allows me to stroke his cheek to feel how perfectly the razor has done its work. And why not? I ushered him into this world, a squealing naked creature. His respectability ends at my doorstep.

"You've come to save me," I murmur. "You've come to save everybody."

"Don't be foolish," he replies. "I'm as helpless as anyone, and even more confused."

I shake my head. "Wine ferments before it grows sweet. That's what you're doing. The sweetness will come."

I think our intimacy pleases him. I wouldn't be in danger if I shouted about it from the rooftops. That's one advantage of being invisible. All poor women are invisible here, except in bed. For half an hour they are divine creatures then. What does that make me, twice as invisible? I was born a slave, and I sleep alone.

The memory of Muhammad's mother haunts me. Aminah worshiped Abdullah beyond the grave. The gods were displeased; Abdullah was her only idol. She took that final trip beyond Yathrib to weep over the pile of stones where they buried him. When she turned her steps back to Mecca, a full month later, grief had destroyed her health. I was walking ahead of her donkey when I heard Aminah say, as softly as a frightened child, "We stop here." She felt sick. Walking beside her, Muhammad hung his head.

I felt a shiver run down my spine. Two women and a six-year-old boy pitching a tent alone in the desert? We got it up somehow, and Aminah crawled inside, as if the tent's folds could protect her from a trembling fever. She died so quickly. I barely had time to send Muhammad out of the tent, but he couldn't stand it and ran back inside, just in time to fling himself on his mother's unconscious body. We wailed together like wounded animals, then buried her with our own hands. The whole way home the boy kept staring at the dirt under his torn, ragged fingernails. The dirt of his mother's grave. What a horrible thing to set your eyes upon.

I had my own horrors. Watching a young woman die like that, burning up in my arms, was worse than seeing your house burn down. This was a soul turned to ashes. Aminah begged me to take care of her boy. I did what I could. For a while it was possible. Old Muttalib took me into his house. I didn't have to live in hell then. I had a tiny room at the back of his rambling mansion. He loved Muhammad so much that he even pushed out an old crone who had inhabited the room like a forgotten ghost. I shudder to think of where she went. But Muttalib died, and his sons lost the power. I cried to lose Muhammad, who was only eight. He went into Abu Talib's

house, a small dwelling where the clink of gold was rarely heard.

I can't remind Muhammad of these things or he blushes with shame. "I should have gone with you on to the street," he says. However, we both know that was impossible.

When he arrives in his fancy blue robes, the braid dragging in the dust because he doesn't pay attention, my boy brings me bread, olives, and a small clay jar of oil. I don't dive into it. The way the vulgar rich tear at their food disgusts me. I taught Muhammad better, and I've seen him sit quiet and hungry while Abu Talib's sons clawed at the dinner bowls like hyenas. With the food Muhammad brings, we sit opposite each other on a tattered rug and nod politely for the other to go first.

"Here," he says once, holding out a small glass vial. You didn't even have to take out the stopper to smell what it was. Attar of rose. I thought I'd faint from intoxication.

"Open it," he urges, when I shove the vial into my underblouse.

"Don't be silly. It will attract flies, and I have enough as it is." But I was just trying to keep from crying in front of him.

As Muhammad has grown, he has become more troubled. One day I ask him about this. "To be empty is to be miserable," he says, which makes no sense

And now the bad times have come. People are afraid. You have to know how to read the signs. One day I'm walking along and what do I see? The sand outside a rich man's gate is bloody. It's not brown blood, the leftovers of a street fight. It's shockingly red and fresh. Usually everyone looks away when there's blood. To stare might mean you've got an opinion about the fight, and anyone with an opinion has taken sides, a dangerous thing to do in Mecca.

On this day I hear buzzing in the air. People aren't just staring; they're talking angrily, and I see something else. The trail of blood leads into the rich man's courtyard. This wasn't just a common knife fight between two young hotheads.

I know instantly what it means. The balance has been wrecked. The rich are protected from losing their blood, unless the tribes can't settle their differences behind closed doors. Once there is chaos, no one is safe.

"Come away. You can't stay here," a voice says, and I feel someone pulling at my elbow. By now the buzzing voices are thicker, like flies around a dead animal, but I see that it's Muhammad, and I let him drag me off.

"I've seen riots," I say, because, to tell you the truth, I wanted to stay and watch. Not for the sake of more blood. I've seen women bloodied by their husbands more times than I can remember. All this cruelty is a kind of vanity, if you ask me. A man brags in the inns that he's a bull in bed when his wife knows he's a rabbit. So she has to pay. A crazy world, when one gets punished for another's shame. I wanted to stick around to find out who the new victims were going to be. If the clans are jockeying for power, the losers aren't the ones you want to serve.

When he gets me to a side street, Muhammad looks worried. He warns me not to go near that house again. I shrug. It doesn't matter that much where you go when you're invisible, but he repeats the warning and tells me there are three other houses I must not be seen around.

"Everyone watches. They know who goes through those gates," he says.

"I'll go where I please," I say. Which is a boastful way of reminding him that wherever my master sends me, I have to go. I have to obey.

"You won't be sent there anymore," he replies. His voice is grim, but he won't explain what he means. As we part at the corner, Muhammad leaves me with strange words: "The dawn doesn't come back to awaken us twice."

I feel prickly all over when he says that, but before I can question him, he has melted into the crowd. Now, you'd think something dark was afoot. Maybe one night the vigilantes will

raid a particular clan and wipe out all the young males. It's happened before, and since they sometimes get careless and slit the throats of a few slaves, I keep to my house the next few nights, begging off that it's my unclean days of the month.

The buzzing won't die down. The next time I carry a basket of washing to the well, I stand next to an Abyssinian woman I know; it's easier next to another black. They leave us alone. And she says, "You won't believe it. Uthman wants to be king. That's why they nicked him with a knife. It happened while he was coming home. He screamed blue murder and ran inside."

"They did more than nick him," I say, slapping the laundry harder against the rim of the well to make more noise. It wouldn't do to be overheard.

"That's not the point. A king—these Arabs won't stand for it."

A few eyes dart our way, so we shut up. But to tell the truth, I feel like laughing. A crazy man calls himself a king. I call myself Queen of the Nile, but the last time I looked, there isn't a crown under my pillow.

Muhammad doesn't smile when I bring it up, however. "Uthman bin al-Huwayrith. He's not crazy. He just doesn't know how to keep a secret."

The Arabs love secrecy more than they love a feud even. They have a saying: "A secret is like a bird. Let it go from your hand, and it flies everywhere."

Gravely Muhammad tells me that Uthman has become a Christian. He looks surprised when I burst out laughing.

"Is that all?" I say. The last thing a slave has to worry about is who to worship. Our masters point to their idols, and there's an end to it. We bow down where they bow down.

"I wish you could understand," Muhammad murmurs.

"Why?"

“Because Uthman has brought the pot to a boil. Not just him. There are others. They refuse to hide anymore.”

I settle down for Muhammad’s sake and pay attention.

“This Uthman is a rich Qurayshi. He got drunk one night and declared that the lands beyond Arabia are civilized. They have laws. A man’s money is as safe there as his life. He can even loan with interest, like the Jews. That made the others sit up, even though they don’t tolerate words against their damned pride. Uthman explained that the Christians are the true sons of Abraham, them and the Jews. If Mecca had a Christian king, trade would improve for everyone. Alliances could be made with Byzantium, where Christians pile gold as high as a virgin’s head to make her dowry. ‘Oh, and who would be king?’ someone yelled in derision. Which is where Uthman should have shut his big mouth. ‘Make me king,’ he shouted over the general laughter. ‘I’m a Christian already.’

“Uh-oh. The room grew quiet. Everyone knew there were *hanif* around, and it was assumed that Uthman was one. He went freely to and from the house of Waraqah. But Uthman tried to wave a big stick and accidentally hit a hornet’s nest. He upset the balance, and over such a stupid thing. They warned him with a nick, but then some others came out on his side, and they were mumbling about Christians and Jews too, saying that they’re all the true sons of Abraham.”

“Why not go and ask Abraham himself?” I say, growing bored with the tale.

Muhammad gives a small, crooked smile. “If only we could.” He explains that Abraham is the grandfather of grandfathers, and no one knows how long ago he lived or who his true sons are, except that part of keeping power for the Quraysh meant that they laid claim to him. He says that if they aren’t the sons of Abraham, they’re just another tribe of puffed-up bullies.

“Are you taking sides?” I ask Muhammad. And he drops a saying: “A lizard doesn’t hop from one branch until he’s sure of the next one.” Arabs live by old sayings. I shouldn’t

criticize. Muhammad is being prudent. He's known for that. He's earned more money by refusing the third cup of wine than by shrewdness.

"This won't go away," says Muhammad, getting up and leaving me the last piece of bread. "Zamzam ran underground out of sight for a long time. No one knew it was there until my grandfather had a vision. God has been running underground too. He hasn't broken through yet, but the ground is moist, and everyone can see it."

"You can't drink moist dirt," I point out. Muhammad smiles and leaves.

6

KHATTAB, THE ELDER

Years ago Christ's army marched on Mecca to destroy us, and almost succeeded. Memories are short. People talk about the trouble being stirred up now. This is nothing compared to the madness back then. I pulled Muhammad into my house to make him listen. His influence is growing in the tribe. He understands trade, and I trade in power. If Mecca collapses, the Arabs will be powerless. We are devouring ourselves.

"Once you hear me out, you can alert the others," I began. "You are young, but your counsel means something."

"Am I here for a history lesson?" Muhammad asked with a serious smile.

"It's a lesson about danger," I said. "Last time the danger came from without. This time it festers within, like a disease. I feel the plague spreading. Trust me, I've seen the worst."

Muhammad bowed and took a seat. "Tell me."

I cast my mind back. "News spread of an attacker marching across the desert. Bedouin boys tending sheep in the mountains were the first to spot the enemy. They ran to town crying that huge monsters were in league with thousands of soldiers. Mecca had no defenses. Our men couldn't form a proper army. The desert has protected us for so long, they had forgotten what war was like. This devil Christ must have been protecting his soldiers to bring them across a hundred miles of sand without dying of thirst. Panic broke out. Everyone became a nomad overnight. The clans ran into the desert to escape the invaders. People said hysterical things: Christ's followers ate human flesh; the Jews had sold them secret plans

to the city. Doors were marked with signs in blood in the dead of night.”

“It must have been horrible,” said Muhammad. He was listening, but you never knew what he was thinking, not that one.

“Horrible? You’ve never stared starvation in the face, you and your generation. The bazaar was stripped clean as if by a swarm of locusts. A few sellers tried gouging. They offered a pomegranate in trade for a pearl. Instead, men held knives to their throats and stole the pomegranate. They deserved it too.”

Muhammad nodded. He never faltered in the respect department. However, the real question remained. Would Muhammad stand with us, the guardians?

I take some wine at noon for my blood, and it can go to my head. I found myself shouting at him. “This must never happen again, do you understand? Never!”

“Is that why you had Uthman attacked?” he asked in a voice as quiet as mine was loud. “Is he part of the disease?”

“Nobody had anybody attacked,” I muttered resentfully.

“Did the knife go in on its own?”

“Uthman is a secret Christian,” I said. “You don’t understand. And since you have eyes in your head, that means you refuse to understand. Let everything crash. I’m old. What does it matter?”

I slumped back on a pile of cushions and poured myself another cup. There was nothing more to say. Muhammad gazed out the window. I stared into the dregs of the wine and swatted a fly. It was too hot to argue. If Mecca goes to hell, they can’t blame me.

“I admire you,” said Muhammad suddenly.

I was so startled, all I could blurt out was, “Why?”

“‘Fate loves a rebel.’ You know that saying?” he asked.

“I’m not the rebel. Things are going on behind closed doors. Conspirators are trying to destroy us. Fanatics, zealots. If they have their way, another army of demons will be at our walls.”

Muhammad didn’t cringe. I wasn’t so drunk that I didn’t know I was losing my case. I couldn’t live with myself if the blame fell on me. To calm my nerves, I retold the story of Christ’s invasion. I assumed Muhammad had already heard it, but I needed to tell it and he needed hear it again.

“You were born that year. I knew your mother, as I knew all of the clan of your great-grandfather Hashim. Her belly was swollen when I came to warn her. Aminah wasn’t the kind to be hysterical. She wanted to know everything, so I talked to her as if she was a man.”

My words were pouring out freely, but I was far away. In my mind’s eye I could see her again, clutching her robe around her throat so that her hand wouldn’t tremble. Aminah was too pregnant to flee, and yet staying behind could mean her death.

“She had barely heard of the king of Yemen, whose name was Abrahah al-Ashram. You know the insolent vanity of those people. Paradise begins when you cross the border into their green land. Abrahah despised Mecca for one thing—the Kaaba and the wealth it brought us. Why shouldn’t hordes of pilgrims come to his kingdom instead of this wretched desert town? In a dream he saw the solution. He had to build a shrine so grand and luxurious that it would awe any pilgrim who set eyes upon it. He obeyed his dream and called his bejeweled shrine Qullays. If a god had spoken in his ear, Abrahah’s ambition might have been realized, but he was listening to demons. They quickly betrayed him. No pilgrims turned away from the Kaaba. The Arabs made up songs ridiculing his gaudy, empty temple. Now Abrahah’s vanity turned to anger. He rounded up an army of mercenaries, spear throwers and archers, the scum of the earth, but experienced in war. They began their march on Mecca, and what did our Bedouin brothers do? They greased the way with food and water, sold at a premium. They even provided guides from the hill towns

who were jealous of Mecca. Abrahah created wonder with a pack of huge gray monsters, as the ignorant called them. They had never seen drawings of elephants.”

I stopped my story and looked at Muhammad. “You think this is only a tale, but the future depends on what I’m saying.”

He quietly asked me to go on.

“When word spread that Abrahah’s army was only a few miles away, the Quraysh gathered in council. The invader sent word that he would kill no innocent civilians. His wish was to enter the city, raze the Kaaba to the ground, and depart. The emissary who brought this news was lucky he wasn’t beheaded on the spot. The Quraysh became furious and vowed to defend Mecca to the last man. One elder dissented, though. ‘We can rebuild even the most sacred building,’ he argued. ‘But if we die, there will be no one left to bring the Kaaba back.’

“That lone voice was your grandfather, Abdul Muttalib. The invaders had scoured the hills to steal our animals, and he had lost the most, more than a hundred camels. If Muttalib could keep his head in the face of such a crime, he was the man to send to the enemy camp as ambassador. Muttalib went and bowed before Abrahah, although obeisance stuck in his throat like a mouthful of thorns. To him he said, ‘Sire, withdraw from our home. We cannot fight you, but our idols are not under our control. I cannot vouch for what they might do. Accept tribute from us instead.’ Muttalib offered money and fruit from the best orchards to be paid in perpetuity. Abrahah sneered at tribute, which he saw as a sign of weakness.”

“Like a true Arab,” Muhammad interrupted.

“No, that’s the cruelest part. He was an Abyssinian, a foreigner. Yemen had fallen to their king. In those days the demon Christ seduced Abyssinia, and his hand was guiding everything.”

“From what I’ve heard, Christ doesn’t inspire war,” said Muhammad mildly.

I grew irritated. Why did he refuse to see?

“Christ inspires whatever makes him more powerful. He’s no different from any other god,” I said glancing at the wine jug. I resisted temptation, as persuasion deserts a loose tongue.

“Muttalib returned to Mecca with the bad news. He counseled calm. He repeated Abrahah’s promise not to harm the populace, but panic spread without check like a contagion. Whole streets were abandoned overnight and became prey to wandering ghosts and thieves. The tribal elders held no sway. They fled faster than anyone. Now came the decisive moment.”

I paused so that Muhammad would be slightly uneasy, uncertain what I was really about. He knows my reputation for canniness and power brokering. Nothing I do or say is casual.

I let anticipation hang in the air. Then I said, “On the night before the invader reached our gates, I spied on your grandfather.”

“Why?” Muhammad was obviously caught off guard.

“Because the Kaaba meant more to his clan than to anyone else. Without the idols, what would happen to the sale of their precious water and the money it brought? Muttalib had done his best to get his family to safety. The only one he couldn’t persuade was Aminah, and her peril gave him added incentive. I followed him from his courtyard to the doors of the Kaaba. He seized the handles with both hands and began to wail. He wailed to every god he could think of. He invoked the one God, Allah, but he didn’t exclude even the most insignificant idol made of cracked plaster. When he was finished, he composed himself. From the shadows I couldn’t hear what he muttered to himself, but we were both Arabs. He left the rest to fate.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Can you believe that his prayers were answered?”

“That very day a sickness fell over Abrahah’s army. Soldiers broke out in sores that oozed poison. Some say a swarm of biting insects swooped down on their camp, but I saw with my own eyes. Within hours the troops began falling to the ground. A day later they were dying in piles. I sneaked beyond the city walls and spied on them. There were no insects. An invisible curse felled them. The war elephants with brass balls on their tusks stood around listlessly, unable to move. Like a man caught in a nightmare, Abrahah realized that the predator had become the prey. The tribes would sniff out this calamity and descend to devour him. He turned tail and ordered an immediate retreat. Suddenly the demon army and its monsters vanished like a mirage.”

“I have listened,” said Muhammad, “but there is a tale within the tale. Why is this about me?”

“Be patient. Your grandfather, Muttalib, was overjoyed, and his prestige soared. Drunken celebrations clogged the streets. Rich men slept with all their wives and woke up exhausted the next morning. Muttalib remained sober. He called a council to create ways to prevent such a threat from ever happening again. Laws were passed forbidding Jews and Christians from living in Mecca. A street patrol was formed, and armed men guarded the prosperous neighborhoods.”

“The guardians, which you lead,” said Muhammad quietly.

I smiled and extended an arm. “I’m not threatening you.”

“Then why does it feel that way?” he asked.

“Listen to me. The man who demanded that the Jews and Christians be driven out was your grandfather. His decree rests upon your shoulders.”

Muhammad was grim. He had never counted on spies. I knew he consorted with the *hanif*. The old ones like Waraqah were beyond my power. If I hadn’t liquored up some half-crazy thugs, Uthman wouldn’t have been warned. And yet it was necessary.

I expected Muhammad to react with fear or passion, but not with violence. I had no dagger hidden under my couch for a talk with him. He did surprise me, though.

“Do you know why I called you a rebel?” he asked calmly.

I shook my head.

“Because you lead the revolt against change. The new terrifies you. The danger isn’t an invisible curse this time. It’s the invisible, period.”

I gave a disgusted sigh and reached for the wine jug. There was no reason to hold back now. “You talk like one of them.”

“They are us. That’s what you don’t see. What are you really guarding? Slow rot. I smell it in this room.”

His voice was strong and steady. He was willing to utter words that get men killed. Had I underestimated him? I pretended to be unmoved while I recorded everything he said in my mind.

“How are they us?” I asked.

“The Quraysh control this city for one reason. It’s not money. My grandfather made and lost a fortune. His sons were left weak and stripped of riches. I was reduced to living like a servant in my uncle’s house, the last to be given bread and the first to be beaten when his sons were in a rage. But I know that without Abraham, our father, the Quraysh are nothing. We owe him everything. The water of life springs from him. For years that has meant less and less. What is Abraham without the faith of Abraham? Tell me your answer, and I will join you. If you can’t, rot with the rest.”

I cannot imagine how he managed this speech without challenging me to a fight. Muhammad’s eyes flashed, but his hand remained quietly by his side.

“You are no longer welcome inside my gate,” I said with cold formality.

“I obey with sadness,” he replied.

A moment later he vanished. I threw my wine cup across the room. It smashed against the wall and dripped purple juice down the plaster. No matter, it was undrinkable, spoiled by the heat. Flies buzzed around my head, attracted by the sickly sweetness of a drunkard's breath. There were too many to swat. I covered myself with a blanket and waited for sleep.

7

A WANDERING MENDICANT

Because I wandered in from the desert, nobody knows my name. They call me “the chick,” because I sit all day with my mouth open, waiting for people walking by to drop food in. It’s a cunning way to beg. Everyone knows who I am, and all of Mecca marvels at how I survive. At times there can be nasty surprises. I’m a decent man, or I would tell you some of the filthy objects street urchins have dropped into my mouth.

Today I’m a beggar, but I have ambitions. I hope to become a fool. People pity fools, and those who don’t are at least superstitious about them. The best fools have gone mad over God. They even think they speak with God’s voice, but it’s all babble. I think about that when I’m curled up in an alley on a cold night. Is it better to be pitied or despised? Those are my two choices.

I don’t feel sorry for myself. On feast days and especially weddings it’s good to sit with your mouth open as the guests pass by. A few will be feeling merry enough to toss a sweetmeat your way. The last wedding was Muhammad’s. Mecca couldn’t stop talking about it. A trader in his twenties marrying an old woman. Why did he agree? It wasn’t for her beauty. The lady Khadijah is forty. Two rich husbands have died on her. So it had to be for her money. He must have played a close game. The widow is rich enough that she resisted all offers from greedy suitors. Rich enough to be the one who proposed to Muhammad too, not the other way around. No one felt she was stooping beneath her station, though, because Khadijah’s purity is impeccable. She was waiting for a pure husband, they say.

And most people were glad that Muhammad was rising. I watched him passing in and out of her gate in the days before the ceremony. Being a beggar, I have a high opinion of him. He's never thrown a pebble down my throat to see if I'd choke and get a bit of a laugh, like some others. One day he struck a filthy boy who was about to drop a ball of dung in my mouth.

Naturally, I expected much from the wedding of a man like that. I arrived at the bride's house a few days early. Mostly women came by, always giggling. I turned my face away. It hurts to see the face a pretty woman makes when she sets eyes on me. Next was a young man in dirty sandals carrying a bolt of fine woolen cloth. I seized his leg and held on tight.

"Let me go," he cried. "You're crazy, not blind. Can't you see I'm only a servant?"

But I didn't let go until he shook his leg and hopped up and down like a nomad bitten by sand fleas. It was funny, really, because he didn't dare drop the bolt of cloth to beat me. After that little prank time hung heavy. I got hungry sitting there with my mouth open, until a large ripe date dropped in. Opening my eyes, I saw Muhammad.

"May Allah give you joy," I murmured, rolling the sweet fruit around on my tongue.

Muhammad was in a rush, but he paused with a curious look on his face. "Does the name of Allah help your begging? I wouldn't think so."

I fawned, hoping for another date. "God shows me who is his son when I am fortunate enough to see one."

"So Allah is just one of your tricks, to see who can be flattered?"

Muhammad didn't say this in an insulting tone. He was smiling and at the same time he pulled another date from his sash, putting this one in my hand. A proper and decent gesture.

I bowed. "I'll tell you my secret, sir. I speak of Allah, because I am practicing to be a fool. When fools speak of God, people are more likely to be superstitious about them."

Muhammad shook his head with amused wonder and went on his way.

If I heard the tinkle of ankle bells but no giggling, it was usually Khadijah herself bustling past me on her way somewhere. She is always in motion. A rich woman must work twice as hard as a man to keep thieves from her hoard. In summer her caravans are headed for Syria, in winter for Yemen. She paces around the camels at dawn, inspecting every bale and sack. But Khadijah isn't pinch-faced and shrewd, if that's what you think. She wraps her head in black to go out at night, and many a poor wretch cowering from the cold and damp has felt her hand on his shoulder. She brings soup and a cloak, even to strangers. She busies herself behind the scenes to marry off her poor relations and drops gold in their dowries, so that the girls won't wind up with a crook-backed bully no respectable woman would touch.

When she passes me, I murmur *ameerat*, or "princess." Khadijah smiles. She's heard that kind of flattery all her life. More than most, she actually deserves it.

One thing about her is resented, though. When feast days come and the other women observe the tradition of running around the Kaaba, she closes her shutters and stays home. The Hajj is not for her, and Khadijah has enough money that she can make no bones about it. Behind closed doors, say the gossips, she doesn't fondle Muhammad's beard. They sit together and mock the idols. Who knows what trouble it may get them into one day.

As the wedding drew near, the groom's visits became more frequent. Sometimes he was too preoccupied to notice me, but if he did, he had a scrap or two to spare. One morning he caught me hobbling to my place by the gate.

"How did you become lame?" he asked.

"My toes were bitten off by dogs," I said.

"Show me."

I peeled the rags off my feet and let him see the ragged row of toes and stumps where curs had chewed on me.

“Is your pain severe?” he asked.

“Not enough to make me kill myself, but too much to laugh all day,” I replied.

Our eyes met. He could see that I wasn't whining to cadge a bit of bread, and I could see that he was actually interested. I wasn't lying at all. My mother made a bad marriage to a drunkard. To make matters worse, her mother-in-law hated her. One day I was left in her charge when I was still a baby in swaddling clothes. Out of contempt, my grandmother left me under a tree while she went to the town well for water. This wasn't in Mecca, but in one of the hill towns surrounding it, on the edge of the wilderness. My grandmother knew very well that packs of wild dogs roam at will, making so brave as to wander into town. Two of them found me under the tree and began to gnaw at my feet, which were sticking out of my bundled clothes. My screams brought a man running, and with a stick he beat the dogs off, but not before they had taken a few toes from each foot. They say when my grandmother returned, she didn't wail. Out of spite, it cost her nothing to see me maimed. Not that I remember anything about it. But one imagines.

You should not suppose that Khadijah spotted Muhammad in the marketplace and felt herself swoon. Nor did he leave love poems pinned to her shutters comparing her almond eyes to a fawn in the moonlight. They were both sober people. She knew two things about Muhammad that anyone in business would be intrigued by. First, he was not all that experienced, having left Mecca on small caravans such as his uncle, Abu Talib, could afford. Second, he could be trusted. Once the Arabs pin a name on you, it travels with you the rest of your life. I will always be “the chick,” and Muhammad expects always to be Al-Amin, the one you can trust.

Khadijah sent her steward Maysarah to greet Muhammad and formally make him an offer. He was to oversee one of her

caravans to Syria, and in return the lady would pay him twice the commission she usually offered. You'd think that Al-Amin, the "trustworthy one," wouldn't need such an extravagant bribe, but Khadijah understood that a woman must be prepared to pay enough to discourage thieving from her agents.

The caravan came and went. The steward Maysarah was sent to keep track of the trades and balance the books, but he was also part family spy. Having been with Khadijah since her father and mother died, he had his mistress's ear, and over the years Maysarah had never betrayed her. When he came home with glowing words about Muhammad's character, Khadijah broke her vow never to marry. Passion didn't carry her away. She waited some months. She continued to line Muhammad's pockets. He rose in her esteem, and one day she sent a messenger, her intimate friend Nufaysah, who touched Muhammad's hem with her forehead as if he was the master, offering Khadijah in marriage. A flurry of negotiations started. Uncles got involved, haggling over details like men with a thousand camels to lose or gain. Two clans, the Hashim and the Asad, came together on the suitability of the match, and thus it was.

That's the story as I heard it from servants who squat in the courtyards and gossip with other servants.

Does a woman's heart melt over balanced accounts and good behavior? You know the answer as well as I do.

It would have been auspicious for rain to fall on the wedding day, but it dawned bright and hot like every other day. The first to arrive were young male cousins, loose and wild. Being without women, it suited their mood to kick me, as if to prove that someone in this world was more miserable than they. I closed my mouth when they passed, just to be safe.

But I was also sunk in thought. I must find special words for the groom when he came in procession. It served me well to impress him; he was about to be rich. I kept turning over the same question in my mind. *What would a fool say?* For

Muhammad, the best tactic was to babble about God, since I knew he had a weakness there. The crowd was growing thicker now. Like civets, the guests left a perfumed trail behind them as they entered the bride's house. Rich robes swirled in the light wind. The richest women had seed pearls dangling from their gauzy veils. Someone dropped a coin in my mouth, and when I looked closely, it appeared to be silver.

At last Muhammad arrived. He smiled to the left and right, but his eyes looked pensive. He shuffled his feet the way he always did, not lifting them high to protect his new sandals from the dust. When he came abreast of me, a dozen hands were reaching for him. I didn't raise my voice, but quietly said, "Lucky is the man who marries God today."

I was in luck. He noticed me and looked down. "I marry a good woman today, not God," he said.

"She might as well be a bad woman," I said. "Allah is in all creatures. "

Guests who were close enough to overhear us began to mutter angrily. I was taking a risk if I kept talking such blasphemous nonsense.

"Your sons will be sons of God, even if they turn out to be drunks and cheats. Do you believe me?" I said.

"I do," said Muhammad, which caused gasps around him.

"Then you are a bigger fool than I am," I said.

"Why?"

"Because all words about God are lies. The Infinite is beyond words."

A few feet reached out to kick me, but not Muhammad's. He didn't smile or frown, but only betrayed sadness with his eyes. Murmuring softly to himself, he tossed me a coin and entered Khadijah's house. A burst of laughter and applause greeted him inside. One Qurayshi came very late, an old man without companions. I was surprised to see Waraqah. His

weakness for God is worse than Muhammad's. It has lost him most of his respectability.

“Allah has truly blessed this house,” I said, rising on my knees as he rushed through the gate.

Waraqah grimaced. “Forget your tricks. I'm the bride's cousin. I have to be here.”

“For the joy of the occasion,” I murmured, to get back at him. Everyone knew that old Waraqah hated leaving his house and the mystical studies that devoured his days and ruined his eyes.

“Joy is the fruit of wine,” said Waraqah. “I have no use for it. She wants to talk business after the ceremony.”

With that, he rushed inside. Don't be amazed that a rich man would waste so many words on a beggar. Waraqah's God loves all men, which shows you how far this religious fever might spread.

TWO

THE ANGEL'S EMBRACE

8

KHADIJAH, THE PROPHET'S WIFE

We had no idea. There should have been omens. There were none. God is as unexpected as lightning in the desert. Before he strikes, the sky is as blue as on any other day.

Muhammad and I had been married in peace for fifteen years under that sky. It was a household of women, four daughters and a wife. There were apricots soaked in rose water on the shelf. When a caravan came home from Syria, each of our girls got a precious little bell to hang around her ankle. When my girls walked, a silvery tinkling brightened the path before them.

Muhammad could have acted like a king behind these walls, or a beast. It was common enough. But I had watched him closely before I unfolded my heart's desire. I wasn't born a fool. He wasn't the only young man who listened to the poets in the bazaar and sat in the shade on sweltering days talking with his cousins. People ridiculed me for offering myself to such a young man. "It's like buying a camel and refusing to tie it up," they said. "It's in an animal's nature to stray." My money ensured that none of them laughed to my face, though. I didn't care that Muhammad had asked his uncle, Abu Talib, for his daughter's hand. The girl was sleek as a cat with eyes as soft as a deer's. Old Talib refused him, because he had set his sights on a better marriage with one from the Makhzum clan.

When Muhammad was new and shy with me, he nervously confessed this failed proposal. I burst out laughing. "Not at you," I said, seeing his crestfallen look. "My first two

husbands came from the Makhzum clan. They left me twice rich. Is that revenge enough for you?”

He paused, weighing his words. “You will lift me far above any life I’ve ever known. My grandfather Muttalib was the last elder in my clan to hold sway. I’m a wanderer among men. I listen to songs, but cannot sing. I hear the poets, but cannot read what they say or write better words if I could think of them, which I can’t.”

He was surprised when I shrugged this off. “Two kinds of people can’t read, the illiterate and royalty. We’ll just pretend you’re a king. My foreman will read for you.”

If Muhammad had turned into a tyrant after we married, I would have had only myself to blame. No one in Mecca saw what we did the day before the wedding. They would not have believed it. We bartered over our future. Well, I did.

“How do you intend to treat me?” I asked.

“How would you like to be treated?” he said. Caution. I like that in a man. He smiled. “They call you a princess, but I was born too low to be any good as a courtier.”

“Treat me like a beautiful young girl,” I said. “But never let me guess what you really think.”

“That is what I really think,” he said, as soberly as if he were assessing the weight of a Byzantine gold piece.

We were lying on a couch—not touching—with the shutters closed and all the servants ordered from the house. It does no good to hide behind doors. They always eavesdrop, just as they always steal from the olive jar and pretend that yesterday’s lamb has gone bad.

I remembered how I looked in the mirror that morning. I said, “Never be tempted by other women. Betrayal would shame me, and shame would kill me.” Without thinking, my fingers traced a wrinkle around my eyes, still a shallow wrinkle. Before long it would be a crease.

“There’s no reason to be afraid. I am betrayed every day. I know shame,” Muhammad said.

I couldn’t hide my surprise. “Who betrays you?”

“My tongue, which is why I rarely speak.” Muhammad meant his accent, which, to tell the truth, everyone notices. He spent too much time with the Bedouin because of his timid mother, who postponed the day he would have to breathe filthy city air. Twenty years later, he sounds faintly as if he just stepped out of a sheep enclosure in the hills. We were comfortable together, lying there, each lost in a dream of what this marriage would be like. His accent was charming to me.

Finally, and with a blush I didn’t know I possessed, I said, “Don’t reveal any other women you’ve been with. But I have to know that you aren’t sick.” If I had picked the right suitor, he had to be pure.

“But I am sick. Some days I think it’s fatal.”

Muhammad rose and walked to the window, peering through the cracks in the shutter. His face was streaked with light and shade, like the image of a zebra my father brought back from Abyssinia when I was a girl.

“Mecca is my sickness,” he murmured. “I get infected again every day. Sometimes with fear, sometimes with rage. On the streets I see the walking dead, and my clan, the Hashim, are almost beggars. I may never recover.” He turned around and saw my mystified look. “As for my body, it has no weaknesses. You could store wine in my belly and load my back with saddle bags like a camel.”

An Arab cannot consider himself respectable unless he has skill in lying. Our life is haggling. We barter to stay one step ahead of drought, famine, and the malicious gods. This back-and-forth with my fine young Muhammad could have been the prelude to disaster. I knew that it wasn’t. Not from woman’s intuition. I knew because Muhammad passed my tests. He asked nothing for himself. He didn’t insinuate that I should pity him for being an orphan. He didn’t sit in profile so I could

admire his curved nose or carelessly dangle a curl over his forehead. Not that a woman doesn't notice.

Even so, I hesitated. My father taught me a saying: "A chameleon doesn't leave one tree until he is sure of the next." I had the cook put rare dishes on the table—roast duck bathed in pomegranate syrup, deep-sea fish so delicate that the skin glistened like a rainbow. I did this to see if he salivated. A poor man cannot help but drool, and if he drools over a duck, how secretly he must be drooling over my money. Muhammad's eyes didn't even wander to the food. He kept his gaze on me. A woman can resist anything but attention.

It wouldn't surprise me to know that Allah watched our every move, heard our every word. They were probably his words in some way, fated and sealed. All my life, I assumed that my will was mine. I had more strength than ten other women. I was called "princess," not "surrender." It's a shock to realize that all this time my will was God's.

It was his will that our two baby boys died in the cradle. I awoke one morning before dawn. It wasn't the hour when a baby usually cries. On that morning, when the first boy died, the silence in the house was different, as if the angel of death had whispered overhead. I couldn't bring myself to run into the baby's room, but sent a servant. And the second time? I had a dream of a boy running after a flock of sheep in the mountains. He looked down at his feet as he ran, and he saw the shadow of a wolf. Before he could cry out, I awoke.

Muhammad didn't want any women to wail over our babies after they died; he forbade mourners in the house. When I asked him why, he said, "If an orphan can't handle grief alone, he won't survive." Rarely did he speak of his past that way. No matter how deep into his eyes I gazed, I never saw scars on his heart. Strange, given that this life is made of scars.

But it wasn't in me to wail, either. I had married off three grown children before I ever met Muhammad. My new babies were precious, but if one died, a part of me wasn't ripped

away. I kept this a secret, but Muhammad sensed it. He was unhappy when I ordered two animals to be sacrificed in the Kaaba. It was considered only prudent to appease the gods after any kind of misfortune. I was dressing in a black veil when he appeared at the bedroom door, tight-lipped. His face was pale.

“Are you going? You don’t have to,” he said. I told him that I couldn’t leave something like this to servants.

“And which gods do you think will help us?” he asked. He ticked off the names of Hubal, Al-Lat, Manat, and Al-Uzza. In Mecca everyone sacrifices to them, even those who have doubts. We’re practical. It costs little enough to please the idols.

“I don’t know which one. All of them,” I said. I tried to sound casual as I smeared an extra layer of kohl around my eyes as a sign of grief. But I felt guilty pretending to be a believer. Who knows? Maybe one of the gods cursed our babies, or us. These things are impossible to fathom. I watched Muhammad standing behind me in the little polished mirror.

“You can forbid me to go,” I said.

In a sarcastic voice that he rarely used, he said, “Can a husband pretend to be more powerful than all the gods? Go if you must.”

I went. It wasn’t piety that drove me, but fear and grief. I didn’t want the gods’ disfavor. But I didn’t want their protection either, the way common, superstitious people do. If I had dragged ten terrified animals to the altar and watched their throats being slit, would that have saved my two babies? What I wanted was to have the knife in my heart come out. Although I kept my desperation quiet, I had to find relief. If the gods existed—if only one existed—maybe it had the power to grant mercy to one in pain. The sacrifice was made, with many citizens standing around and nodding their approval.

When I came home, Muhammad asked me if I felt better. I shook my head. I felt ashamed to put on such a dumb show

before gawkers and idlers, people whose only interest was in seeing a rich woman suffer despite her money.

I've never pretended to have humility, but my pride didn't stop me from running to Muhammad and begging his forgiveness. He lifted up my face and asked me to look at him. Then he said, "I understand your despair. Bring it to me. Half your pain comes from keeping it a secret."

I can't say that the knife immediately withdrew from my heart just because I had a kind husband. That took many months. But my husband and I sat up the rest of the night talking between us about things that wives rarely speak about, such as our sense of frailty. When we stand so low in creation, as every girl is taught, our hope is that at least the gods will give us strength. I was such a girl, wondering where protection would come from in a violent world.

Giving birth is a death sentence for one mother in six, maybe more. I'm willing to believe, but in what? The finger of fate passes over the scrolls and chooses this one for pain, that one for delight, this one for life, that one for death. Has this invisible hand ever been seen by anyone, even the most devout? Once seen, would it change just because a pitiful suffering woman cries out? Fate wipes out creatures by the thousands with a single flash flood in the hills or a summer of drought. We humans are creatures too, subject to the same whimsical catastrophes.

This episode of the sacrifice could have caused Muhammad to condemn me; instead, it brought us closer. We found that we shared no brilliant answers. We shared the same questions instead, and that was enough.

It was my custom to go to the bazaar every morning to inspect the goods and keep an eye on prices. Once I got married there was no practical need for me to do this. I had turned all my business affairs over to Muhammad. He resisted at first. "There is no need. You've run your own affairs for years," he argued. "And if it's my pride you're worried about, don't."

“It’s the pride of every other man I’m worried about,” I said. They could barely endure taking orders from a woman. I didn’t want them whispering behind Muhammad’s back that I married him just so I could emasculate him.

I won’t say the matter was settled in one conversation. It’s always delicate when a poor man is yoked to a rich woman. Muhammad understood. When a big ox and a small ox try to pull a cart together, it will likely tip over. I told my old steward, Maysarah, to present all the accounts to my husband from now on. He raised an eyebrow, but obeyed. So you see, I could have spent the rest of my life behind doors driving the servants crazy, the way respectable women do. I tried. After two weeks Muhammad begged me, for my own sanity and everyone else’s, to keep up my customary ways. The caravan camps were my natural habitat. As he put it, I would still be a lady even if my sandals smelled of camel dung. Unlike the chameleon, I jumped to a new tree, but kept one foot on the old one.

I went on my inspections even when I was with child. The first delivery was two months away when an old man called out to me, “So it’s true. You really did change your sex.”

It was Waraqah, who had only grown stranger as he grew older. He was sitting on a low wall in the warm winter sun. My legs were sore from waddling down the cobbled street, and I decided to have a rest beside him.

“Ah,” he said. “You’ve given up a man’s life, but you’re still as brave as a man.”

“Let people talk. I don’t have to be brave to sit beside you,” I said. “Unless I’ve made a mistake and you still have a tooth left in your head.”

He tilted his head back and gave a croaking laugh. “I’m not the one who will bite you if you’re seen with me. There are others who will be happy to do it.”

He was only half joking. The rich old man was regarded with suspicion among the elders. Waraqah no longer sat with

them in the inns, and he hadn't made things any easier for himself by hanging around the Kaaba, muttering oaths at the pilgrims who passed nearby.

I said, "You don't fool me, you know." The veins in my legs had stopped throbbing. I balanced myself on the wall so that my swollen belly didn't make my back ache so much. "You're not as cracked as they say."

Waraqah shot me a sidelong glance. "If I'm not cracked, then what am I?"

I searched my mind, but he didn't wait for a reply. "The word you're looking for is subversive. I'm a snake in a basket of dates. Like your husband."

The expression on my face made him give out another croaking laugh. "You've made him rich, and you did it overnight. But a dangerous mind doesn't get less dangerous swathed in finery."

I was struck silent, which seemed to please Waraqah. The penalty for free thinking had gotten severe during the past few years. Mecca was no longer the city I grew up in. We breathed suspicion. Muhammad wanted to keep his good name, but he would no longer be Al-Amin, the trusted one, if people couldn't trust his opinions. For most men, words are the same as thoughts. As soon as a thought is in their head, it's on their tongue. My husband had thoughts he didn't speak.

The change that came over the city happened almost the day that the gates slammed shut behind Abrahah and his army. It wasn't enough that the invaders all fell sick and their war elephants retreated like a mirage in the desert. Mecca felt defenseless as never before. A foreigner had breached the one barricade we thought was impassable, the desert. Now the Qurayshi elders decreed that no Christian or Jew should set foot inside Mecca. Since the idols had saved the city by miraculously defeating the invaders, they should have no competition. Foreign gods were banned, and worshiping them meant death or exile. One of Muhammad's own cousins was exposed as a *hanif* who bowed to one God and was forced to

flee. The *hanif* were no more to be seen, except for Waraqah, and he had grown much quieter.

The rights of Jews and Christians meant nothing. To ordinary people only their money did. If a Jew was so rich that his business couldn't be done without him, he could pay a levy to come within the city walls. Once here, he couldn't be seen praying or doing obeisance to his god, Yahweh.

The Quraysh had risen to such power that they were able to enforce these decrees. Abu Talib listened to Muhammad's pleas for tolerance. Waraqah muttered at the door of the Kaaba. They were powerless to intervene, however, when the whole tribe stood against them. "I've tried to wear them down," Abu Talib said mournfully. "My words evaporated like a summer shower hitting a hot stone wall."

The rabble were organized into gangs who roamed the alleys beating on drunks and frightening servant girls on their way to the well with water jugs. A hush settled over the city. If you clamp down, people will obey, and the obedient can be mistaken for the contented, if you squint hard enough. To hear the elders talk about it, the Year of the Elephant, as everyone started to call it, became the beginning of a golden age.

This state of Mecca went through my mind as I sat beside Waraqah. "Get pregnant. Drop as many young as you want," he said. "But deep down you're with us."

I looked at the ground, pressing my fingers into my upper thigh to make the biggest blue vein stop bulging.

"So I'm not far wrong," he muttered, interpreting my silence. "I can tell you something else. Muhammad broke my heart when he left the cause. There were only four *hanif* to stand up for the truth, and we were all growing old. I think of your husband every day, but we barely speak when our paths cross. Maybe now I have an understanding with you."

"Perhaps."

It was Waraqah's turn to look surprised. "What gives a woman this kind of courage? I was just goading you."

I shrugged. It wasn't courage, though. My caravans have traveled the length of the Arab world, from Yemen to Syria. When they returned home, I sat my men down and made them tell me about what they saw and heard. My father didn't raise me to be ignorant. Like Muhammad, he was fond of the old sayings. One of them is this: "A fat woman is better in winter than a blanket." My father would frown and say to me, "I want you to be more than a better blanket when you grow up."

My men told me in particular how foreigners think, because when you know what is in a customer's mind, you have an advantage over him. That's how it began. After a while, though, the peculiarity of men's minds gained its own fascination. Arabs believe that Abraham built the Kaaba, but Jews believe he founded their tribe in Jerusalem. We say that God ordered Abraham to sacrifice his older son, Ishmael. The Jews say it was his younger son, Isaac. Muhammad was a bit shocked that I knew such things, perhaps more shocked that they made me think skeptical thoughts about the idols surrounding the Kaaba. He quickly realized, however, that this was a bond between us. We rarely spoke about it.

"I don't mind being hated, you know," said Waraqah out of the blue. "A thousand curses never tore a shirt."

I smiled. That was another of my father's sayings. The old man and I were relaxed now. He pointed to a donkey some yards away. The animal was tied to a long stick attached to a grinding stone. He trudged in slow circles, and as he did a lazy-looking boy threw grain under the millstone to be ground into coarse flour.

"There is your common Arab," said Waraqah. "He walks in circles and thinks he's getting somewhere. Tie an idol to his nose, and he thinks the gods are leading the way to Paradise."

The old man was growing deaf, and he said these words in a voice loud enough that two merchants passing by overheard him. They looked our way and frowned. Then seeing who it was, they bowed and moved on quickly.

I got up and dusted off my skirts, which were speckled with chaff from the millstone. “You know people who were driven out of Mecca,” I said. “They talked the way you do.”

“They didn’t see what’s coming. I’ve read the signs. I can afford to wait.”

With this strange comment Waraqah waved me on my way, saying that we’d meet again. When I returned home, I told Muhammad everything. I didn’t leave out that he had broken Waraqah’s heart. He winced but said nothing, and when I asked him to open his mind to me, my husband said, “Better a free dog than a caged lion.” Men. They could pass their whole lives with old sayings. And yet I knew that my encounter struck deep inside him.

9

JAFAR, A SON OF ABU TALIB

It finally happened. A *jinn* has driven Muhammad mad. He was seized in the hills somewhere, inside a cave, they say. Why was he there in the first place? It is well known that *jinns* hole up in caves, and the wind that blows through the blackness is their howling. Even shepherd boys won't chase a lost lamb into a cave without making a cut in their forearm and offering drops of blood to the gods.

A stranger in the street told me what had happened, which meant that the news was spreading fast. I ran to Muhammad's house near the center of town. Who would I meet there? My family is Hashim, and our first instinct would be to gather the clan around any member who's in trouble. But trouble isn't the same as being seized by a demon. That kind of thing is infectious. It was just as likely that I'd run into spies sent by the Qurayshi elders. I wouldn't put it past them to use this as a pretext for seizing control of Muhammad's affairs. Anything to get close to his wife's money.

There were no spies and no Hashim men milling around, though. There was nobody at all. A stray dog was sniffing at the locked gate. I stood there, listening. In a house of women there's always something going on. Gossip, clattering pots, the clack of a loom. Here, there was nothing. I considered pounding on the gate and shouting for somebody to come. I was quite anxious for him. I would beg his wife to bring in a priest or a worker in spells. I looked around. The houses are pressed close together near the Kaaba, and my shouts would be overheard. Reluctantly I walked away. I wasn't an elder, and feeble as the Hashim have become, it's the elders' business to help or condemn one of their own. Let it never be

said that I was the first to move against him by raising an alarm.

I fretted all the way home. Muhammad has strange ways. Everyone knows that, not least his family. I heard that he and some others, including his oldest friend, Abu Bakr, had gathered by night to swear an oath. A secret ceremony? I hate the *hanif*, but to tell you the truth, that sounded promising. My cousin is too sober for his own good. The spice of intrigue wouldn't hurt. Once the oath was made public, I ran to Muhammad in disgust.

“What is this? You've sworn to give to the poor? What the gods won't do, you are going to do instead?”

It was ridiculous. I'm not yet forty, but I agree with the old ones who grumble that this kind of sacrilege will tear society apart. Muhammad listened to me ranting for a few minutes, saying nothing. His silence made me more agitated.

“You think a man's life should be about helping dirty, squalid slaves?” I cried.

“I don't know what a man's life should be about. That's precisely why I help dirty, squalid slaves,” he replied calmly. “Do you have a few you can spare?”

Muhammad became even stranger after his marriage. I, his favorite cousin, no longer could tap at his window to run off on an adventure. No one ever supposed he would lose his mind. I ached for news that he was all right. Muhammad wouldn't leave his house, but gossip can pass through the tiniest crack in a fortress. Soon servants ran from the house of Abu Bakr to see what my father was willing to pay for scraps of news. They were excited, out of breath. Abu Talib was taking a nap as usual, so I met them. I sat them down and gave out dates and well water. I saw them furtively slip the fruit into their robes rather than eat it.

“Tell me, quick,” I demanded. “If you're spreading scandal, I'll have you whipped.”

The youngest one, a curly-haired Syrian who was good-looking and therefore presentable among people of quality, spoke up. “He was wandering in the hills by himself. Very dangerous. Some people don’t never return, and those people had ideas, just like him.”

“What do you know about ideas?” I asked angrily.

The Syrian slave gave me an insolent stare, and my hand itched to take out the leather crop I keep under my robe. But I let him proceed.

“I know about *tahannuf*,” he said. “My master has gone on such a one. He thinks he goes into the hills by himself, but I am sent along to keep guard. Out of sight, you can bet. He wouldn’t like it.”

Well, it’s no crime to go on *tahannuf*. For as long as we can remember, Arabs have sought solace in the wilderness. The meadows outside Mecca are ideal for this—green and quiet, closer to heaven. As for myself, I help to make sure Mecca stays filthy, if you know what I mean. But the Syrian’s master, Abu Bakr, took *tahannuf* every spring, and so did Muhammad. Muhammad’s interest in business affairs had steadily waned, year by year. Even his four daughters found him aloof; he had turned away from our world, vainly hoping to find another.

“What are you telling me? Nothing new,” I said. I reminded this insolent slave of an old saying: “A grateful dog is worth more than an ungrateful man.” To underline the point, I held out a small coin. Despite himself, his eyes widened greedily.

He said, “I’m telling you, great sir, I have seen men kidnapped when they go on such retreats. I’ve hidden behind rocks and watched their throats get cut and their bodies flung into gullies. Some of them still had money in their purses.”

“They didn’t have money for long,” I said dryly. “You can vouch for that, can’t you?”

The ambushes couldn't be denied. Who goes on *tahannuf* but the devout? And no one is more devout than these troublemakers who cry out against our sacred ways. Some of them go into the hills to find their God, and we make sure they do. It serves as a warning to the rest. Muhammad had more sense.

“So you were sent in secret to spy on Muhammad?” I asked.

“To protect him, great sir, not to spy.”

“Abu Bakr had reason to fear for his friend's life?”

The Syrian slave bit his tongue; it wasn't his place to divulge his master's intentions. He looked surprised when I put the coin in his palm and closed his hand around it. “You did well,” I murmured. I love Muhammad. Once my father took him in as an orphan, he became my brother. In a tolerant voice I asked the slave to spare no details. He had to tell me what he saw that made Muhammad lose his mind.

“For a long time, he did nothing out of the ordinary,” the slave began. “Master Muhammad liked to walk on the slopes of Mount Hira, because it lies only an hour by foot from the city walls. I got bored following him. It didn't come into my head that he was searching for something, a hideaway, like. One day he found a lonely cave whose mouth was hidden by brush. He cleaned the cave of all the nasty debris and animal skeletons, even washing the floor himself with rags dipped in a stream. He began to take long retreats inside the cave, sometimes from dawn to nightfall. There were times when he had to use the stars to guide his way home. Like I told you, I was bored something terrible. I became restless sitting down below on the hillside with nothing to do but wait for him to leave. What use is there in avoiding other people like that? A rich man should enjoy himself. He should spread his money wherever he can find wine and women.”

The slave thought he was playing to my nature, but I showed no reaction. He went on.

“Master Muhammad’s trips to the cave started coming more often. One day I couldn’t help myself. I fell asleep in the sun, and when I opened my eyes, Muhammad was standing over me. He smiled a secret smile, but spoke not a word. We two made our way down the mountain together. That didn’t stop my master. He insisted I keep watch even if Muhammad had caught on.”

“Listen carefully,” I said. “Did you see any signs?”

“Of madness? No, great sir.”

“Signs of anything unusual?”

I put my question cautiously. It seemed impossible that Muhammad was casting spells or trying to lure *jinn*s to help him with some dark business. He wasn’t capable of such things (although I know more than a few who are).

The Syrian thought for a moment before replying. “He had moods. Of that I’m sure.”

“What kind of moods? I thought you hung back, hiding from him?” I queried.

“At first. But once he caught on to me, we kept company. He wanted to talk.” The slave’s voice was hesitant. People of quality share their lives with servants. There’s no other choice. We’re surrounded by them day and night, but there’s a barrier between us. The slave would be doing Muhammad no good by saying that he had lowered that barrier.

Do you want proof of how anxious I was? I went into the pantry and brought out the best bread and cold lamb. Without a word I spread the victuals out on the table. The slave watched warily. I tore off a piece of flatbread, wrapped it around a morsel of meat, and handed it to him. I was willing to lower the barrier that far to get more news, but the look in my eyes warned the Syrian not to push me. I knew I should have called the slave by his name, but I forgot to ask. I doubted that I would ever see him again.

“It’s dry,” he mumbled as he chewed. The cheeky bastard wanted me to bring out some wine. I ignored him. When he

had swallowed, I told him to finish his story.

He said, “Muhammad and me talked almost every day coming down the mountain. He liked to ask me questions.”

I couldn't hide my surprise. “What kind of questions?”

“It depended on his mood. That's what I'm trying to tell you.” The slave eyed the lamb. I gave a curt nod, and he took another chunk, holding it in his fist until he satisfied what I wanted to know. “One day we saw a dead kid goat in a ditch. It had fallen in and broken its leg. The dogs got to it before anyone heard it. Muhammad stood a long time staring at the gnawed carcass. ‘Where is that goat now?’ he muttered. I assumed he was talking to himself, so I didn't respond. He looked over at me and said, ‘I lost two sons before they even knew they had a father. I lost my father before he knew he had a son. Where are they now?’

“I was nervous, but I spoke up. ‘Wherever they were,’ I said, ‘it was different from where dead goats go.’ He laughed and said, ‘A good answer, but it wriggles out of the question.’ After that he was quiet all the rest of the way home.”

I held up my hand for him to stop talking. I needed a moment to think. Muhammad never mourned his lost sons properly before the gods. Word started going around that he was a secret unbeliever. Because the Hashim clan was too weak, Abu Talib, my father, couldn't send anyone out to punish those who talked against Muhammad. We had to swallow our pride and take it. But if this Syrian was to be believed, the thought of those two dead babies preyed on him. *Jinns* sniff out weakness of mind; they know how to twist the knot of self-torment inside a man.

“Did he talk about his dead sons again?” I asked. The slave shook his head. “Did he ever bring his new son to the cave?” The slave shook his head again.

This new son was another piece of strange business. Muhammad is forty this year, but his wife, who is fifteen years older, cannot give him more children. He gave no sign that this

was a grief for him. Then one day he came home and said, “I want you to buy me a son.”

Khadijah was all but speechless. “Who?” she asked, keeping her wits about her.

Muhammad explained that he was wandering through the bazaar when his eyes fell upon a young boy being sold as a slave. A raiding party had just returned to town, with captives taken on the trading routes. These raiders have only one thought in mind, to grab their prey and get away without being killed. They never think to take care of their prizes, so that they can be fit to be sold. Like the others, this boy was starving and gaunt. His eyes were sunken, but when Muhammad stared at him, the boy stared back defiantly. As if he had any power to do anything. But Muhammad was impressed, and he thought of the future.

A woman of Khadijah’s age doesn’t usually want to discuss what might happen in the future. She agreed to buy the boy for Muhammad. When he was brought to the house, she was just as impressed by him as her husband was. They changed his name from “Zayd, son of who knows what” to “Zayd, son of Muhammad.” So now the wealth of a lifetime may be passed on to a foreign captive. One day I may have to fight him for my share.

The Syrian was waiting impatiently for my next question. The only one left was the obvious. “What happened to drive Muhammad mad?”

“*Jinns*,” said the slave quickly.

I frowned. “Don’t repeat what everyone else is saying. You were there. What did you see?”

The slave trusted me enough to tell the truth. “I saw a man running away from something he can never understand. We were on the mountain, but Master Muhammad didn’t come out of the cave at sunset. I didn’t know what to do. He has stayed all night before, when it’s warm enough. I could run home and sleep in a warm bed, then go back at dawn, and nobody would

be the wiser. But I stayed. Ramadan is a strange month, they say. I didn't know what might happen. So I wrapped myself on the ground and tried to sleep. The next thing I knew, Master Muhammad stepped right over me. His heel brushed my shoulder, and I looked up to see him. He was as white as the dead. He acted as if he didn't see me lying there, but just kept walking, at a fast pace. Like I said, he was running from something. I gathered myself and ran after him. He didn't look like a man who was in this world. No matter how loud I called, he wouldn't look back or answer me. We went like that until we got to town. Muhammad stopped in his tracks and stared at the sky. He wasn't staring like some ordinary lunatic, but as if he expected someone to fly down. If we had been inside the walls, people would have gawked, I can tell you. Then he shuddered so hard I could see his body quiver under his thick robes. A few minutes later we went through the gates, and I followed him home until he shut himself up inside."

So, there you are. The worse had come to the worst. I turned my face away. I didn't want the slave to get the satisfaction of seeing the effect his tale had on me. With a wave of the hand I signaled for him to leave. He and the other slaves wasted no time bolting out the door. Abu Bakr would surmise that his trusted Syrian was selling information. I sighed. Tomorrow he would find another rich house and another one willing to fling some coins at him. Muhammad's reputation was dashed. Our enemies were already laughing with glee.

Which is worse, the wickedness of the world or the curse of demons? I sat there pondering the question until the night robbed the room of all light. Muhammad didn't deserve this fate. Or maybe he did. Ill luck befalls any man who thinks he can pry the gods' secrets out of their fists.

RUQAYAH, MUHAMMAD'S THIRD DAUGHTER

His first fear was for himself. For his soul, I mean. My father knew that something must have gone horribly wrong. Only later did we discover that he had run from the cave to the top of the mountain to hurl himself onto the rocks below. He never suspected God's wrath. Yet when he summoned the light, it shattered him. Allah can drive someone as mad as any demon.

I was showing my littlest sister, Fatimah, who was barely five, how to pick flowers in the courtyard when he staggered home. "My child!" he cried, claspng Fatimah so hard to his breast that she could hardly breathe. His agitation made me tremble. After a long, deep stare into Fatimah's eyes, he ran to his room and bolted the door. I don't think he even recognized me.

We will never forget the seventeenth day of Ramadan. The brunt of it fell on my mother. I watched her pace the floor, growing paler and paler. That first day we lived in dreadful silence. My father allowed no one to approach him. Leaning at his door, we girls heard weeping and loud, tormented cries. I tell you, I had heard the words "gnashing of teeth," but the actual sound, like stones grinding together, is horrifying.

On the second day he allowed my mother into the room. When she emerged again, her face was set and grim. I thought my father must be dying. When I asked her, my mother said, "Some things are worse than dying. There is also death in life."

She wouldn't let me ask any more questions, but sent me to fetch the servants. When they were assembled, my mother put on a face of incredible calm.

“I won’t lie to you. The worst may not have happened, but if not, God save us from the worst,” she said.

My mother couldn’t stop the anxious cries her words caused, but she quickly moved on to allay them. “None of you will have to leave. You are safe with me. You’ve heard the sounds of your master in torment. If you love him and trust me, listen to my orders.”

With that she told the servants to run to our relatives among the Hashim and bring them to her.” Don’t give out any details. It’s not for you to suggest anything, not with a certain tone of voice or a rolling of the eyes. This is no idle moment. It’s a crisis that will tell me everything about who you are from this day forward.”

What could they say? My mother’s will subdued the servants as long as they were behind our walls. As they ran off to gather the clan, some may have panicked or indulged in wild fantasies. We all did. As soon as the house was empty, my mother took me aside into a private corner with my two older sisters. Fatimah could be distracted by giving her a doll to play with in the next room.

“Your father isn’t mad. He has been overwhelmed,” she said. “We will nurse him. We will watch over him. Those things go without saying. I know they are the desires of your heart. But only waiting will tell the tale.”

“What has overwhelmed him?” asked Zaynab. As the oldest, she had the right to speak first. Later as events unfolded, she was not so faithful to my father. Zaynab’s mind was occupied every waking hour with getting a husband. Even at that critical moment, her thoughts lived halfway in another man’s house.

“He doesn’t have enough of his wits back to make sense,” said my mother, who was always candid with us. “He mumbles the word ‘power’ over and over.”

In Arabic she said *qadr*. The only way for me to explain the word to strangers is “power.” For us there are hints and

shadows in this word. It signifies a mystery, a holy presence that has descended to shatter one's body and mind.

My second sister, Umm Kulthum, stole a glance in my direction. She didn't want to understand anything at first. Her instinct was to protect the young ones. Besides Fatimah, there was the slave boy Zayd. He was new, and we had not learned to think of him as our brother yet. He was some years older than Fatimah, but too young to understand how a grown man in the space of a single night could turn into a quivering heap.

The Hashim men came quickly, demanding in loud voices to set eyes on Muhammad for themselves. My mother refused. "You will see him when he's himself again. What lies in that room is not Muhammad."

An unfortunate choice of words. Mutterings about *jinns* arose. My mother knew they would, but something else was on her mind. She had to keep Muhammad's name from being ruined. Instead of fighting with rumors, she went on the offensive.

"When was the Kaaba in ruins? When was it rebuilt? Let any man step forward who did more to rebuild it than my Muhammad."

The rumbling began to die down. You see, the Hashim were so poor and trampled on that they had little left but their honor. My father was the most honorable among them. He earned that title five years before. The Kaaba had become a shambles. A wag said that it was a good thing pilgrims came for the Hajj to run around the Kaaba, because if they dared to touch it the walls would fall down. As things stood, no one was willing to repair the sagging roof and the cracks that ran from top to bottom. Fate then stepped in. A flash flood stormed through the center of town. The waters dug a course straight for the Kaaba, almost submerging it.

In a panic people ran to save the idols. My mother laughed at that. "They can't wait to rescue the very gods that caused this," she muttered. By the time the waters receded, the roof had collapsed. There was no choice now. A certain faction was

still too superstitious to intervene, holding that the walls were sacred, even though they were on the verge of falling down. To touch them risked angering the gods even more.

Others grew disgusted with this attitude. The issue was settled when Al-Mugirah, a rough, sensible type, walked up to the Kaaba in front of everyone with a sledgehammer. He took a swing and knocked a huge gap in one of the walls.

“If the gods want to kill me, let them do it now,” he shouted.

Nothing happened, so it was decided to start over and build a shrine that would last forever. All at once the very clans that wanted to kill each other to keep the Kaaba intact vied to make a new one. That too proved futile, for when they got down to the foundations, a layer of green stone was exposed that could not be broken, no matter how many burly slaves knocked at it. The Quraysh declared that the foundation was laid by Abraham and must not be touched.

My father watched quietly off to one side. He came home one night and said, “A fellow brought a bowl of blood to the work site today. He held it up in the air, screaming that his clan was entitled to finish the work, no one else. He was backed up by twenty toughs with knives drawn. Who knows where he got so much blood? It spilled over the edge of the bowl and streaked his face while he screamed.”

Yet this bizarre incident made my father’s fortune in a strange way. There was one stone set in the eastern wall of the Kaaba that my father told us to hold in reverence. It was black and polished and about the width of a large man’s hand. “We are the people of Abraham, and when he built this shrine, he laid in place a single stone from the time of Adam and Eve. In that stone is our hope,” he said. I didn’t know what my father meant by “our hope,” but I can’t remember a time when the Black Stone was not touched and bowed before by every pilgrim.

When it came time to set the Black Stone back in place, a feud broke out among the clans. Nobody wanted to grant the

privilege to anyone else. At the same time, no one wanted to risk the wrath of the gods by not claiming it for himself. Fights broke out daily at the site, until it was decided that only one man, Muhammad, was trusted enough by all the clans to settle the dispute.

Muhammad wasn't eager to go. I found him lingering by the gate with his best robe on, washing his hands in a basin, then calling for fresh water so he could wash them again.

"It's a sly tactic to call on me," he said. "There is no one who deserves the privilege over anybody else. Whoever I choose, the rest will be furious with me. They will fall on each other's necks, and when the dust clears, our family will be blamed. We will be weaker than ever, which is the whole point."

You wouldn't think that the same man would have returned home two hours later wreathed in smiles. "I did it," he said with quiet exultation. He called for the best sweet wine and even diluted it three times with water so we girls could drink.

"What did you do?" my mother asked, as baffled as anyone.

"I stared solemnly at the rock for a long time, as if it was going to deliver an answer. In fact, I was scouring my brain in mounting desperation. Then the simplest idea occurred to me. I ordered that someone bring a large sheet of cloth. I had the Black Stone placed in the center and signaled for the elders of the four major clans to each take a corner of the sheet. 'Now lift it together to the height where the stone will be placed,' I said. 'Then you will all share in the honor and reap the same reward from the gods.'"

From that moment on my father earned a respectful nod and a raised beaker at the inns. But he insisted to us, his family, that he wasn't wise. "I am only a man among men. The point was to give these hotheads an escape route, so they wouldn't lose face. Nothing more. If the gods noticed, they were as amused as I was."

My mother's efforts to remind the clan of their debt to my father worked to hold off the spiral of ruin momentarily.

Several days later my father appeared at the door of his room. He still looked pale and stunned, but he held his arms out, and one by one his daughters ran into them. When I embraced him, it felt as if half his body had wasted away. The last to be embraced was Fatimah, who was frightened by the deep black circles around my father's eyes.

You could see that he was hurt when Fatimah backed away. "What's wrong, my child?"

"I want my papa back," she blurted out and burst into tears.

My father swept her into his arms, calming Fatimah's fears. Even as he did this, he looked around at the rest of us. His eyes said, "And do you think your papa is not here?"

You must understand, during that terrible week we held the family together by not speaking our deepest fears out loud. I asked to be taken to the Kaaba to pray. I'm sure my sisters did as well. We avoided looking at one another during meals. Some of the servants weakened and began to spread rumors; my mother wasn't above taking a stick to them.

Then as quickly as we lost him, my father became himself again. Like a patient whose fever has broken, he mastered his crisis. I don't know how he did it. Yet one day I found him sitting alone on the floor of the pantry eating one flatbread after another between gobbets of lamb and beakers of well water. When he saw me, he burst out laughing.

"Forgive me, Ruqayah, you shouldn't see your father with a greasy chin and bits of food hanging from his beard. But I am famished!"

"Your chin? Papa, you should see yourself. Your whole face looks like Fatimah's when she's gotten loose in the butter." I laughed with him, even as tears blurred my eyes.

He stuffed himself, and then he slept. By nightfall he called his wife and us daughters into his presence. He smelled

freshly bathed, with a touch of rose oil in his hair. His beard was no longer an unruly weed patch, and his eyes gleamed, even though they seemed far away.

“My dear,” he began, addressing us as one beloved person, “a great thing has occurred. My soul has wrestled with the possibility of madness. I teetered between destruction and greatness. But by God, the matter is resolved.”

None of us expected this. His distraction had turned to joy. He seemed as exultant as a bridegroom.

“Zaynab, quit looking at your sisters like that. I wasn’t mad before, and I am not mad now!”

“Then what are you, sir? Explain it to us simply, so we can understand.” Being the eldest—and somewhat spoiled—Zaynab could speak like that, on the verge of insolence.

My father saw that her motive was anxiety. “I want you to celebrate with me, my dear. This is a victory of the soul. I have been touched to the quick by Allah. “

My father caught himself a second time. He could see from our anxious faces that he must compose himself. Once he had, he continued in a calm voice.

“I have enjoyed the fruits of a good life, and another man would have been satisfied. You poor girls have been cursed with a father who cannot close his mind. Ordinary men think it their solemn duty to never open their minds. But I cannot speak for them. All I know is that despite the comforts and love within this house, I have been restless and discontented.”

My father spoke without accusation in his voice, but he sensed our disquiet.

“I am not putting even the slightest bit of blame on you. I should ask your forgiveness.”

He would have reached out for us, but my mother spoke up. “If you want to calm our fears, do as Zaynab asked. Explain in terms we can understand.”

My father bowed his head almost meekly. “I have been leading a secret life. Inside the walls of Mecca, I have played the part of a man who must be like other men. When I walk into the hills, Mecca vanishes like a fever dream. Behind my back those in the clan shake their heads and pity this poor, deluded seeker. They believe in no God and trust none of the gods they do believe in. My secret is that God is not someone you can seek. He is in all things, and always has been. He created this earth and then disappeared into it, like an ocean disappearing into a drop of water. I saw much in my cave, but this mystery was the most important.”

Zaynab interrupted him. “Simpler, Papa,” she pleaded.

My father sighed. “An angel came to me. He told me that I was God’s chosen one.”

I will always wonder if Zaynab was ready to shriek or burst into wild laughter. We will never know, because my mother shot her a look like daggers. With all the effort she could summon, her face growing red, Zaynab stayed silent.

“Are angels real?” my mother asked quietly. We all knew, although we never spoke of it, that my father had been talking to wanderers, some of them Jews, others Christians. To an Arab, angels were fantastic, all but unknown.

“Very real,” my father said quietly. You could see that he was treading lightly inside, like a man who may be walking on quicksand. “In the middle of the night one came to me in all his radiance. I was wrapped in a blanket on the cold floor of the cave. I shivered when the angel called to me, and at first I didn’t know that my trembling was awe, not the cold. I saw a figure arrayed in light standing before me. His voice was commanding, like a soldier who could not be disobeyed, but it was also so gentle that it all but broke my heart. ‘Recite!’ he ordered.”

My father looked around at our little group. We were hanging on every word. “You know, my dear, that he was asking the impossible.”

It was true. My father never recites verses or sings songs. It has been a sore point with him since he was a boy with the Bedouin, almost a humiliation. He was only a listener, never a speaker, and listeners win no glory.

“I told the angel I could not recite. You see, even though I was in awe, my mind kept working. I realized that this had to be a dream or a trick of the demons. A notion came into my head that if I talked reasonably to this ghost or *jinn*, a way of escape would show itself. The angel grew in size and brilliance. Twice as forcefully he ordered, ‘Recite!’ Before I could respond, he threw his arms around my chest and embraced me, to prove that he was no apparition. I cried out, thinking that I would faint—his arms wound around my chest like iron bands. Three times I tried to resist, and three times he seized me in his arms.”

You will well believe that my father couldn’t remain composed while telling us about the angel. His agitation was strong, and Fatimah began to cry. My mother sent her away with a nurse before Fatimah could plead again, “Where is my papa? I want him back.” We heard her wailing die away as the nurse, enfolding Fatimah in her skirts, rushed to the far corner of the house.

“Was that your victory of the soul?” asked Zaynab, who seemed determined to let her doubts speak for her.

“Not yet. I was still too troubled to think,” said my father. “When the angel finally released me from his grasp, I dashed out of the cave. My deepest wish was to rid myself of this horrifying burden. To be God’s messenger belonged to any other man in the world but me. My heart pounded, and my only thought was to throw myself off the mountain. I beg your forgiveness. In my distraction I failed to think of my family, and the fate that awaited you all if I died. At the summit of Mount Hira I stood on legs as weak as a kitten’s, staring down at the rocks below. The angel hadn’t followed me out of the cave. That much was a relief. It gave me a few seconds to breathe. Then I looked at the sky, and he was there. The angel towered over me as high as thunderclouds piled up to heaven.

I turned around, and he was there behind me, and to every side. I knew at that moment that the form of the angel I saw in the cave was infinitely smaller than his presence. It was an image suited to human sight. The real angel, who came from Allah, lives in Allah. He must be infinite if he is real.”

“What do you call this one who came to you?” asked my mother soberly.

“Gabriel. He told me to call him that,” my father said.

Now I spoke up. “You haven’t told us if you obeyed him. Did you recite?”

My father’s eyes gleamed. “That’s the miracle, my dear. A humble man whose tongue has no more eloquence than shoe leather suddenly spoke.”

My father closed his eyes and held forth:

*Recite! In the name of your Lord,
who created human life from congealed drops of
blood.*

*Recite, for your Lord is ever bountiful,
he who teaches by the pen,
who taught mankind what was not known before.*

As he spoke, my father was transformed. His face glowed; he seemed transported to Paradise. And the verse. I can’t explain to strangers how beautifully it fell on the ear, like liquid song. Such precious words couldn’t have been his. Where did they come from?

Zaynab broke the spell by suddenly fleeing the room. I looked at my other sister, Umm Kulthum, who had been playing absent-mindedly with her braided hair, the way an infant might pet a doll. “How beautiful,” she murmured.

The moment was over. My mother ran down the corridor calling for Zaynab. My father came back to his usual self with a small cough and asked Umm Kulthum if she was all right. A servant ran in to announce that Abu Bakr was at the door.

“Tell him I’m just coming,” said my father, adjusting his robe and looking around for his slippers. He wouldn’t greet a respected friend in his bare feet.

As he was leaving the room, I grabbed his arm. “Tell me, Papa, what has really happened to you?”

“There is an inner man that nobody sees,” he replied. “Now he is on the outside, and the outer man, who is seen by everyone, he is gone forever.”

11

ABU BAKR, MERCHANT OF MECCA

We were only a handful at first. I can't describe how strange we felt, being set apart from society. It wasn't like having the plague. Just the opposite. Imagine that you are starving, driven out of your home to wander the wasteland. In every direction there is only emptiness, and the voice of fear whispers, "Life is nothing but this."

Then one day God spreads a banquet in the desert. Succulent viands, deeply tinted wine, the richest sweetmeats. At first you can't believe your eyes, but soon you have gorged yourself, and lo, a second miracle. No matter how much you eat, the feast renews itself. The table groans with God's bounty.

That was us, starving souls who were fed by Muhammad's words.

"Don't make sheep's eyes at me," he would say. "I am not your shepherd. The only shepherd is Allah. I am just a man among men."

I had known him for thirty years, man and boy, but his humble attitude still amazed me. Wouldn't you want to be worshiped? Anyone who answers no is either lying or has given up on life. Muhammad had done neither. He knew that he didn't cook the feast or make it appear in the desert. He was simply the host who beckoned more guests to come and be filled.

You would have been filled too, sitting at his feet when God delivered a new message. First there was the moment of contact, which was always the same greeting:

In the name of the Lord, who is merciful and
compassionate.

We'd never know what would come next. Muhammad
himself never knew. God is a master of surprise.

Do you not see how he has lengthened the
shadows?

The One is He who made the night a garment for
you.

He gave you sleep so that you may rest,
and the morning sky to be a resurrection.

Who had ever seen the night as a garment and the morning
as a resurrection? I marveled that God could combine beauty
and a promise. It was magical.

I squandered my good name by standing up in the inns,
before anyone was drunk yet, and reciting a sura, a passage
like that. I felt compelled the way ordinary men are compelled
to argue, fight, belch, and make love. With a fresh sura in
mind, having run from Muhammad's house, I'd recite things
no one could fathom:

He has prepared a bonfire for those who reject the
hour that is to come.

They will cry out for death,

and He will say, "Do not cry out this day for one
death, but for many."

Idlers and sots lounging around the wine casks would stare
at each other in bewilderment. Why was I ruining their
drinking hour with talk of death? Or this:

On the day that the sky is split open and the angels
stream down in hosts,

true authority will belong to the Lord of Mercy.

On that day the unbelievers will tremble.

Apocalypse is a bad appetizer. But the men couldn't be deaf when it was me, Abu Bakr, who uttered such warnings. I wasn't a crazed half-wit. I had bested most of them in trades and reaped gain from their loss. Muhammad was delighted that I made a spectacle of myself.

"When you stand on a table to speak, they see you standing on a pile of gold," he said. "You're halfway to God already."

Those same men would have scorned my real motive. I wasn't about to gorge myself alone; I had to share the sustenance from heaven. Imagine my sickness of heart when so many people turned away—everyone, if you want the truth. They despised Muhammad's message without even hearing it, like someone who turns his back on a feast because a rumor has spread that the food is poisoned.

It wasn't even a question of believing. Arabs are a murderous race, so our enemies say. If so, we must be murdering in our sleep, because few in Mecca wanted to wake up even when God shook them.

They didn't turn on Muhammad all at once. That's the best I can say. Suspicion spread slowly, like smoke seeping through cracks in a wall. The authorities went on guard first. The Qurayshi elders fixed Muhammad in their steely gaze like hyenas waiting to see if a wounded lion would fight or fall. He didn't do either. One day his gate swung open, and Muhammad walked out, strolling to the marketplace as if nothing had happened.

Muhammad's uncle, old Abu Talib, breathed a sigh of relief. His nephew was respectable again. "If you want the gods to protect you, be harmless," Abu Talib said cynically. "If Muhammad had the slightest power, they would strip it away. At least now he can live as strangely as he wants, so long as he keeps quiet." Abu Talib never lost the bitter taste of his own downfall.

I sat at the foot of the old man's bed and nodded. Abu Talib was right about power. We have a saying: "If power can

be bought, sell your mother to get some. You can always buy her back.”

Abu Talib was wrong on another point, though. I was sent to tell him the bad news.

“Muhammad will keep quiet in public, but not behind walls. He’s the messenger of God. In his mind, everything has changed. He can never go back.”

Abu Talib sat up, his face turning red. “In his mind? In my mind I may be the emperor of Abyssinia. So what?” His rheumy eyes narrowed. “What about you? What do you think of this madness?”

“I think we should wait and see,” I said.

Abu Talib threw himself back on his pillow. “We’re lost!”

The old man loved his nephew. Abu Talib never forgot the promise made to Abdullah’s soul, that his son would always find shelter under his roof. Abu Talib knew it would be catastrophic to rock the boat. The Quraysh had nailed down every corner of the city. They had the rats marching in straight lines, people said in private. But Allah can turn a world upside down at His whim. What does Allah care about fat Qurayshi merchants and their padded asses?

I took my leave by telling Abu Talib to get some rest.

He gave another smile, more nervous than cynical this time. “Will you carry a message to the prophet? It’s not from God, but it is important. Tell my nephew not to visit my house unless I summon him. I want to die in my sleep.” Abu Talib moaned softly, pulling on his wispy beard. “Poor, foolish soul. Tell him I have turned my face to the wall. I don’t care if Allah opened his eyes. That’s his business. But if he tries to open ours, there will only be trouble.”

I brought word back to Muhammad. He took the news calmly. Who was pledged to believe him, anyway? The nearest blood—his wife and daughters; little Zayd, who knew no better, but was devoted to his foster father. And I, who shared no blood with any of them. As long as he held on, Abu Talib

was still head of the Hashim clan. Yet with each passing year he continued to spend too many days in bed and lose too much money. He spoke for no one but himself now.

I was surprised how closely Allah watched our movements down here. He had his ear to local gossip, because one day this message came through:

The doubters will say, “How can this be God’s messenger?”

He walks through the marketplace like any other man.”

Tell them, all my messengers have walked through the marketplace like other men.

Before the angel appeared, Muhammad had the town’s goodwill. Unfortunately goodwill is like a rose in the desert. Unless you tend it lovingly, it withers overnight. Naturally everyone was glad to see Muhammad back on his feet and among the living. Until he spoke, that is. A man who had cultivated tact suddenly had the unruly tongue of a child. I once took another merchant with me to see Muhammad soon after the great change came upon him. This man was wary, and I wanted the word to go out that Al-Amin was the same trusted man he had always been.

Zayd greeted us at the gate. He was squatting on the ground stringing together a kite. The boy was used to me, but he grew shy seeing a stranger. I complimented him on his kite, which would fly like a bird.

“Not any bird. A falcon,” said Zayd gravely. “It will pluck the eyes out of anyone who hurts my father.”

The merchant I had brought gave a small, twisted smile, and I hurried him inside. Muhammad was sitting in the back of the house. During that time, I should say, he might get a new message from God at any minute, day or night. No one knew this outside the family. I only risked bringing a stranger, because I knew the signs when Allah spoke to Muhammad. His whole being would change, like a lantern that suddenly

has its cover snatched off. If I saw that happening, I could spot a wasp or smell something burning, any pretext to rush the visitor out of the room.

Muhammad beckoned us to sit. We didn't chat, not at first. Whatever you may hear about him from friends or enemies, Muhammad always bore himself with a quiet dignity. This too had been changed by the angel. Now he wasn't simply quiet, he created a silence around him that filled the room like a heavy perfume.

Clumsily, I started up some small talk about business. The visitor felt on safe ground now. He related a tale about a sandstorm that struck his last caravan. It rolled over the camel train like a towering brown wave on the ocean. And when they were no longer blinded, his men found that two camels had wandered away. Even though his men searched for hours, they were never found,

"They swear that the storm blew them into the clouds. And I believe them," said the visitor with a tight laugh. "I had them tortured in a cellar for a few days, and they never broke." He threw his hands in the air. "My loss. You must know how it feels." Muhammad, like any other merchant, had suffered such misfortunes.

Muhammad gave the man a look. I confess, inside I silently pleaded, *Don't talk about God. You need allies.*

In a sober voice Muhammad said, "If you trusted in Allah as you should, He would sustain you in all things. In God there can be no loss."

The man, who was conscious of being the richest person in the room, had never been spoken to in this way. To the most tolerant Quraysh, Allah was the first god among many. To most of them, he was just one more way to squeeze coins out of pilgrims. I could see the man's cheeks start to burn. Before he could respond, Muhammad added, "God sustains us even as He sustains the birds, which go forth in the morning hungry and return filled in the evening."

The rich man had regained his composure and smiled tolerantly. "Pearls of wisdom," he murmured.

Muhammad's eyes widened innocently. "My words will mean nothing to a glutton, whose bloated belly makes him believe he will never need God."

And that was that. The rich man went pale. "Extraordinary." With one word he sprang up and ran from the room. His hard soles clattering down the hall sounded like a panicked kid goat scrambling to escape from a pack of wild dogs. You will not collapse in shock to hear that he became Muhammad's sworn enemy.

We few who believed in the new prophet began to write down his messages. Each sura came in a distinct way. If Muhammad was about to speak at God's command, his face became shining and full of light. His voice grew higher and more intense. I swear on my soul that one could not mistake this voice for any but the holy Being reaching down from Paradise to this world of clay.

The first time I beheld him in such a trance, my heart was touched. We are not all ignorant in Mecca. On a caravan north to Yathrib, I saw Jews and Christians openly walking the streets and selling in the markets. When I was a child, to see a Jew was the same as seeing a six-legged calf. I asked someone, who told me that these were followers of a priest who had come to Arabia on the orders of God. I asked why. To prepare the way for a prophet. Then I asked how many believed. The man I was speaking with opened his arms and said, "As many as will be received, even some Arabs." So you see, God was not foolish enough to throw seed on fallow ground.

I asked Muhammad if he heard the words he spoke when he was transported. "I hear them, and I am as touched as you. I feel the same awe."

"Then you are a prophet who can share in the joy he brings," I said enthusiastically.

He gave me a look. It wasn't a chastisement. His eyes lowered, and he said, "Not the same joy. I must carry the shame that God speaks through such a cracked vessel."

The messages grew thicker, and some days they descended like locusts in swarming season. There were days when you could catch a dozen with one sweep of your hand in the air. God never spoke unless there was someone in the room to hear and remember. I sat as if hypnotized for precious hours. The world has never been changed from inside a room. I knew that well enough. But it was hard to show my face without a mask, until one day I went to the worst side of town and knocked on a door.

The door was answered by Halimah, Muhammad's old wet nurse. She had moved from the desert a few years earlier. A proud woman in a black shawl mended with a dozen patches. She had outlived most of Muhammad's family with such steel in her spine that she threatened to outlive the rest of us too.

"Come with me," I said.

"I don't see money in your hand. What work do you want me to do?" she replied. Suspicion of the rich was second nature to her.

"The work of a crutch," I said.

Halimah was still quick. She liked riddles. "What kind of crutch does a man need when he has two legs? A loan? I'm not the right one for that. An hour of love to boost his self-esteem? I don't sell my nieces."

I held up my hand. "I need your voice, because mine is too weak." Halimah had heard Muhammad speak and was most moved. Her face lit up almost to match his.

As we walked through the streets Halimah asked no more questions. She followed me to the sacred well in the center of town. As always, women were gathered there filling their water jars and gossiping. They quieted when they saw me. Some stared at my velvet slippers, covered with mud from

trudging through Halimah's filthy street, which ran like a sewer.

"Talk to them," I ordered.

Halimah hung back. "What should I say?"

"Repeat what Master Muhammad told us yesterday." I knew she had it memorized.

The old nurse with her missing teeth and lowly station had no reason to believe she had a right to speak. But I've learned that when they repeat a prophet's words, humble people breathe some of his fire. Halimah took all the women in with a slow gaze, and then she recited:

Allah promises a garden to all believers, men and women alike.

Beneath this garden rivers flow, and therein they will abide—

blessed dwellings in Gardens of Eden.

But acceptance from Allah is greater than this. It is the supreme triumph.

I won't say she didn't stumble over a word here and there. Wind whistled through gaps in her teeth. The women at the well were stunned. They stared at each other in amazement. Half of them wouldn't have let Halimah sweep the dust under their feet. Yet no Arab wife or daughter had ever uttered such words. And so many! Halimah didn't know how to react, but she was proud of herself. The angel commanded Muhammad to recite, and now his followers would recite too, over and over.

I ran and told Muhammad what had happened. "Is this how we will change the world?" I asked. "One believer at a time?"

Muhammad replied, "Has there ever been any other way?"

12

ZAYD, THE ADOPTED SON

I see more than they know. I'm not just a boy to be sent away to fly a kite. I sneak through the shadows and peek through cracks in the door of my father's bedroom. My new father, I mean, the one who gets tears in his eyes when I touch his feet.

I saw him sitting up in bed. His wife—my new mother—was sitting beside him holding out a tumbler. He took a sip. In a low voice she asked, “Do you see him now?”

Father nodded. “He is before my eyes.”

Mother looked around. “I see nothing.”

“The angel is here. He appeared just as you came in,” Father said. “He has come a few times now.”

“But he's invisible to everyone else,” said Mother, not quite asking a question and not quite making a statement. She was like a bather testing the water to make sure it's not too hot or too cold.

Don't ask me what happened next. I heard little Fatimah running down the hall. She was whimpering, which meant that the next sound out of her mouth would be “Ummi, Ummi,” and Mother would come out to answer her. When Fatimah saw me in the shadows leaning against the door, her eyes grew wide. I couldn't be caught there. I said “Ssh” and promised to take her out to play. Fatimah looked at me with a moment's suspicion, but she likes to play better than she likes to tattle.

When I was in bed that night, my mind went back to what Mother was asking. “Do you see him now?” That's what you ask crazy people. *If Father is crazy, then I will be alone again.* That was the first thought that came to me, and I couldn't get

it out of my head. Believe me, I tried. I knew I had to be the perfect little boy. That way, even if they drove all the servants away and tied Father to the bed so he couldn't kick and scream the way crazy beggars do in the street, they'd keep me.

This is a house full of chatter and kitchen sounds, clanking pots and maids scolding the nomad who brings milk because it's not fresh. But when my father ran down from the mountain, a strangeness descended over us—the sound of silence. Why is it so frightening? Because it's like the silence before a man is hanged or beheaded. Those things happen to murderers in this city. Murderers and enemies caught on a raid if nobody sends ransom for them. I almost saw a beheading once, before Jafar caught me and dragged me home. Jafar is the cousin I like the best on most days.

The thought that Father had gone crazy was driving *me* crazy. Then I hit on something. What would a perfect boy do? I ran to the cook, who was rolling little balls of dates with honey and almonds. When I asked to help, she looked surprised and said they had girls to do that kind of work. I sat myself next to her and dipped my fingers into the bowl of sticky brown dough. Cook sighed and showed me how to roll the little balls properly, until they were as smooth as marbles.

“Just don't eat any. Master gets them first,” she warned. I knew why too. Mother thinks that the candy will sweeten his thoughts. That's another thing I heard. I begged to be allowed to carry the sweets to Father's room. Cook looked over her shoulder.

“You don't want to go in there,” she whispered. But I whined, and when she let me trot off with the silver tray covered by a bright red cloth, I think the cook was relieved. At least it wasn't her.

So that's how I got inside Father's room. He looked very tired. His beard was all tangled, and sweat had matted his hair. I tiptoed in and put the tray by his pillow. Then I asked him very low if he wanted some water.

“You can speak up. I’m not dying,” he said. “It’s not that simple.” Who knows what that meant. I fetched the water. He didn’t touch it, and he didn’t reach for the date sweets. When he caught me staring at the tray, Father pushed it my way.

“Go ahead. It will make them happy to think I’ve started eating again.”

I ate five. You can be a perfect boy and still eat candied dates, right? I’m not sure they made my thoughts sweeter, but I was less afraid. And braver.

“Do you see it now?” I asked.

Father gave me a look. “How do you know about that?”

I shrugged and waited. Either he would jump on me for sneaking around listening at doors or he’d tell me what he saw. I guess he wasn’t in a jumping mood, because he sighed and said, “I can’t choose to see or not see. He comes when God sends him.”

“Sends who?” I asked, with the knowledge that my father always had a special gift.

Pause there. First, I have a riddle. What three-letter word makes a boy invisible if you take it away and makes him visible again if you give it back? I go around asking people this riddle, but nobody ever gets it. When they give up, I walk away.

“Hey, the point of a riddle is that you tell the answer,” they all cry after me.

I just smile. “If I tell you the answer, you’ll be able to make me invisible.” Nobody gets to do that to me again.

The answer is *ibn*, which even strangers know means “son.” When you’re nobody’s son, you’re invisible. I never expected it to happen to me. I was tied to my father, Haritha, the way he was tied to his father, as tight as a goat tethered to the back of a wagon. But Allah had other plans and decided to make me as invisible as Himself.

One night I was sleeping under a warm blanket, and then in a moment it was snatched away. A raiding band had invaded our town. Two rough hands bound me hand and foot. They didn't bother with a gag but threw me over the back of a saddle.

This is a dream, I thought.

I heard the horse's hooves clanging over rocks, and its iron shoes threw sparks. The rider who towered over me started to lash his mount to go faster. The tip of his whip caught me in the face. The pain made me wince, and I tasted blood as it rolled down my cheek. This was no dream. The lanterns of the town faded into the night behind us. I had turned invisible.

No one needs to hear the details of what happened next. Allah wanted me to survive, and I did. One day my new father spied me standing in a dirty shift on the slave block in Mecca. I didn't squeeze my eyes shut when they lifted the shift to show that I would be able to breed. Shame doesn't exist when a boy is invisible.

You see why I interrupted my story with a riddle. Muhammad could see me. And if my new father could see me, then I am not surprised that he could see other invisible beings now.

"Who has God sent?" I repeated.

"An angel. Angels are His messengers," Father said.

"And Mother can't see it?"

He shook his head. "She has to ask. And if the angel is there, I tell her where he's standing. She believes me. She says that I have a reputation for telling the truth. Why would I start lying now? Especially with a lie that will make me look crazy."

Now my father's face wore a small, crooked smile. He was making me feel better. Once when I was walking with Jafar, he gave a coin to a beggar who was crouched on all fours, barking like a dog.

“Do you know what makes him a madman?” asked Jafar as we walked away. He was always dropping coins like that, and you never knew who he’d pick to drop one on.

“Because he barks like a dog?” I said.

“No. He’s a madman because he doesn’t know he’s mad.”

I kept that in mind, because people do all kinds of crazy things, and it’s useful to pick out the ones who have lost their minds. Father was worried that he might be crazy, so that meant he wasn’t. I told him so, but he didn’t look very comforted.

The worst time for him came soon after that. He kept seeing the angel—he never knew what corner it might be hiding around—but God had nothing to say. There were only two messages. First, when he was afraid and lying in bed, covered with his cloak. God saw Father hiding there, and why not? He can see through walls and hearts and the lies men tell. The angel appeared saying:

You who are wrapped in your cloak, Arise and spread the warning.

Glorify the Lord’s greatness. Purify your garments, avoid all that is unclean.

Do not be weak and overcome. Be steadfast in the work of your Lord.

Father immediately told the message to Mother. His heart was torn. Every day made him realize that he was chosen, but who should he warn? Who would listen to him if he did? In her way, Mother had also received a message. Her cousin was old Waraqah, who was blind now and confined to his house. I saw his face only once, and his eyes were clouded over with a white film. Yet the old man’s head turned in my direction, even though I hadn’t said a word. In secret he became a Christian, Mother said. I don’t know that word, but she told me that Christ was as great a prophet as Moses.

“Then why does the tribe hate him?” I asked, meaning the old man, although it was no different with Christ.

As an answer, she quoted a saying: “Blind eyes see more than a blind heart.”

I wasn't with her when she ran into Waraqah when he was near the Kaaba. He demanded that his relatives take him there to pray, no matter what threats hung over his head. When he heard that the angel had come to Father, the old man trembled and said, “Khadijah, the holy spirit has come to him. He will be called a liar; they will persecute him. He must hold fast.” Mother could see how overjoyed Waraqah was, but she was afraid for him as his voice grew louder. “Holy, holy, holy! He will be the prophet to this nation. But he'll have to fight. If God gives me life, I will be by his side.”

Mother tried to calm him. In her heart she was overjoyed and ran home to tell Father everything. Despite this omen the angel brought no more messages. Days passed like weeks. The silence in the house became more anxious.

“If God has something to tell you, why doesn't He do it all at once?” I asked.

“He wants to be sure I'm strong enough. All at once might destroy me,” Father replied.

People outside don't know what it did to him to be at God's mercy. We're all at God's mercy. I know that better than most. But for my father it was worse.

I was exhausted being perfect. Nothing I or anyone else did lifted the look on Father's face. Until one day he filled the house with a shout. We all came running. It was a hot morning, and he had woken in a sweat. At that moment a second message had come from the angel. Father recited it quickly, almost out of breath, word for word.

*You, wrapped in your cloak. Stay awake through
the night,*

leaving half or a little more for sleep.

Recite the Koran, slowly and distinctly.

We are going to send a great message down to you.

When you pray at night, your words will be sharper.

*The day's long hours are filled with activity,
so by night devote yourself wholeheartedly to the Lord.*

He is the Lord of east and west; there is no God but Him.

Mother and Father looked relieved. They told me and the girls to sit down to a meal together, like a real family. No one felt crazy that night. Father was smiling the way he did before God arrived. It was like the sun coming out again.

Only to fade in the coming weeks. The great message never came through. We all waited. Father acted the best, even though he had the most reason to be restless and nervous.

“God has told me how to live,” he said. “My duty is to obey.”

He stayed up half the night praying. My room is close to his, and if I opened my door I could hear him reciting in a strong voice the messages he had already received, over and over. I didn't understand the words, but it brought him peace of mind. This meant we could all stop worrying. I ran out to play again. Mecca is like Paradise to a boy who likes catching rats, chasing dogs, and flying a kite. The months passed, and I almost forgot about the angel. They told me in hushed tones one day that Father had started to receive more messages. He had waited six months. He had started to visit people again, and everyone assumed the crazy times were over. They all breathed easier.

I was pretty sure that it was good for him to hear from God again. In the house Mother said it was good, but I should not talk about it. She saw the worry in my eyes.

“Be happy. God is keeping His promise,” she said.

I smiled, acting reassured. On the inside I remembered a saying: “A promise is a cloud. Fulfillment is the rain.” I ran outside when I heard my cousins shouting for me. It wasn’t raining yet. But I didn’t care. When a stranger asks my name, I tell them what Father told me to say: I am Zayd ibn Muhammad.

I’m not invisible anymore.

13

ALI, THE FIRST CONVERT

The battle waged against the Prophet is fierce and grows worse every day. It's been seven years now. To protect some of his followers, he sends them across the sea to Abyssinia, where the Christians recognize us as brothers under the same God. A bitter irony, this. Our own blood brothers, the Quraysh, persecute us without mercy. I remain patient, as the Prophet commands. I carry a dagger with me at all times and wait for the day when God will choose the real sons of Abraham.

There's another reason I refuse to run. I lost everything worldly, so that I could gain everything holy. I see that now, as clearly as you see your hand. My poverty doesn't make me ashamed anymore. I used to cringe when thugs laughed at me in the street. My sandals were torn; I barely had a coin to pay a washerwoman to soap the dirt off my robe. When I walk to the Kaaba to pray to Allah, I smile at the wicked. Why shouldn't I? I've secured my place in heaven; no man can strip that from me.

So, you sons of Ishmael, heed the Prophet's warning:

He will not enter hell who has faith equal to a mustard seed,

and yet he will not enter heaven who has pride equal to a mustard seed.

I wish I had your courage, to stand at the mouth of hell and not care. You defile the Prophet's name and spit on the ground. That puts him in good company. I've seen men spitting on God in the shadow of the Kaaba. You prideful Quraysh know no shame. You have poisoned Muhammad's camels and spread vicious slanders about his daughters. Your plotting has

worked. Didn't Zaynab, his oldest girl, marry a man who refuses to believe? She loves her father, but she fears her husband more.

I've held the hand of a small boy beaten half to death because of a rumor that one of his cousins worships Allah. As his bloody head was being bandaged, I comforted him with Muhammad's promise: "Whoever has seen me, that same man has seen the truth."

So defile me too, that's what I say. It will get me to my reward more quickly.

The faithful tell me that I have the purest blood of anyone who follows the Prophet. My mother was walking past the Kaaba when suddenly she went into labor. To guard her modesty she rushed inside, and so I was born in that holy place. This means nothing to you who pretend that the Kaaba is sacred, but peddle whores within shouting distance of its walls. My mother stayed there for three days until she was well enough to leave. When I opened my eyes, the first face I saw was Muhammad's. He had come to protect my mother the moment he got word of her plight. I was as small and red as a wrinkled crabapple, but he foresaw my destiny. "Name him the exalted one," he said, which is where "Ali" came from.

My father is a sheikh, the same Abu Talib you mock so freely. He was bewildered that I was born in the Kaaba, but he took it as a powerful omen. It wasn't a good omen at first. I nursed at misfortune's breast. I remember being five when the famine struck. Drought wiped out my father's flocks and destroyed the crops in every direction from Mecca. My father couldn't afford to feed me, so one day he sat me on the floor.

"I face shame no matter what happens to you," he said, hardly able to keep from weeping. "The shame of losing you is better than the shame of having you starve under my roof. Seek a better father if you can find one."

I begged to be taken in by my cousin Muhammad. I had known his house since I was old enough to walk. No questions were asked if I grabbed a fistful of dates from the jar and

gobbled them down in the corner. When I appeared at his door, Muhammad embraced me and kissed me on the cheek. I became a son to him at that moment, without a word between us. It was like freezing in winter and then suddenly feeling the warm sun on your back.

Let me tell you how the Prophet opened the door of my soul, so that he may open yours. I was eleven when the angel appeared to him. When Muhammad ran down the mountain and hid himself in his room, I was frightened, and what made me most afraid was Khadijah's face the first time she came out of his room.

She took me aside and said gravely, "You must believe. I am not saying this to anyone else. I know you're only a boy, but you must believe anyway."

I asked her why. Khadijah hesitated. "Your cousin Muhammad is now your father. A son's faith begins with his father."

"My father? Abu Talib couldn't even feed me."

Khadijah shook her head. "Abu Talib didn't know it, but he was working the will of God. You were cut adrift to put you under divine protection. Thieves hanging out in the alleys might have stabbed you for a laugh. Instead, you were sent to be the Prophet's son."

She never used the word "prophet" to anyone but me, not in those first days. Muhammad confided to me—this was years later—that he had his own doubts about who he was. He was cowering under the sheets when Khadijah pulled them off and said, "God wouldn't punish a man as righteous as you. I hope with all my heart that you are the prophet promised for so long."

She saw no reason to distrust the angel. So a woman was the first to believe, not me or any other man.

What does a boy of eleven know, anyway? I ran through the streets with my new brother Zayd throwing rocks at stray dogs, peering through cracks in a fence when the camels

mated, and wondering why the sight made my body grow hot. By night I asked questions.

“Father, what did the angel look like?”

“At first I imagined that he looked like a man bathed in light. But soon he was transparent and filled the whole sky.”

“If I haven’t seen an angel, how will I know God?”

“When you know your own self, you will know God.”

“But you say Allah is everywhere. If I traveled the whole world, I still wouldn’t see Him.”

“The Lord has told me, ‘My earth and my heaven cannot contain me. The heart of my faithful servant can.’”

And so I believed without question, the way one believes in the sun. Once you set eyes on the sun, how can you doubt it? To sit at Muhammad’s feet is like listening to the fountains of Paradise. When new converts present themselves, he puts his hand on my shoulder and says, “Here is my first follower. His face is pure, because it never touched the ground bowing to an idol.”

I used to blush to hear that. Behind his back, others argue that I wasn’t the first convert, because I worshiped no one before Allah. Therefore, what did I convert from? Nothing. But all of this was secret for the first three years. Muhammad spoke of his revelations only to us few. Then a message came that the entire Hashim clan should be invited to accept the one and only God. I was not yet fifteen, but Muhammad directed me to prepare a sumptuous feast. Forty servings were prepared, enough for every man in the clan.

When the invitation went out, messengers scattered all over Mecca. Muhammad was precise in his instructions. “Don’t give the invitation to a servant. Wait at the gate until you get inside or the master of the house comes to you. Bow with respect, and make sure that you use these words: ‘Muhammad has spared no expense.’”

The last part was canny. Many people had grown suspicious of Muhammad. They all knew the word “Islam,” “acceptance,” which he preached. But the Prophet’s enemies reminded everyone that the same word meant “submission.” “You see? He wants to be chief over the whole city. His God is just a front for his own naked ambition,” they sneered. However even the wariest of the Hashim wouldn’t miss a great banquet for the world.

The evening arrived; the guests pressed their way through the gate. Muhammad was as good as his word. There was so much food and drink that eighty men could have gorged themselves. The servants were run off their feet; every girl woke up the next morning with bruises from being pinched. I looked around, knowing that every reveler was a doubter. I resented stuffing them with spiced lamb and honey bread, when tomorrow they would only complain about Muhammad louder than ever.

Muhammad was unruffled and reminded me of an old joke to settle my nerves. “A constant complainer died and was sent to hell. When he arrived, he looked around and frowned. ‘Is damp wood the best you can burn down here?’ he said.”

When the company was sated, every man lolling back on his cushion with satisfied groans, Muhammad got to his feet. “Sons of Al-Muttalib, in the name of Allah I know of no other Arab who could have provided a feast like this. I have brought you the best of the hereafter as well as the best of this world. Allah has commanded me to invite you to enter heaven.”

Uneasy glances darted around the banquet room. If they hadn’t gorged themselves, someone would have grumbled to hear Muhammad invoke Allah’s name. A law had been passed forbidding it.

Paying no attention, he raised his voice. “Who will help me in my mission? The one who steps forward will be my brother, my successor, and the leader of the faith after I die.”

His call was so passionate that my heart began to race. I gazed around, but the Hashim were looking down at the floor

or whispering among themselves. Muhammad asked again for anyone to step forward, and then a third time. I couldn't help myself. I jumped to my feet and said, "I will help you."

Silence.

Muhammad's eyes swept the room, catching a glimpse of every uncle and cousin. None of them moved; a few snickered.

"By the will of Allah," he said soberly, "I declare that Ali is my brother, my successor, and the ruler of the faith after my death. You owe him respect, and you must obey him."

Now the snickering turned to open laughter. One of Muhammad's uncles, Abu Lahab, turned to my father. "See what submission means? From now on, Abu Talib must bow to his son." There was harsher laughter at this, and I could read their angry faces. Every uncle in the room would have to bow to his nephew Muhammad, if they accepted him as God's messenger.

That feast was four years ago, and as events turned out, Abu Lahab became our fiercest enemy. He organized attacks against the believers. He once saw Muhammad praying near the Kaaba and grew so enraged that he grabbed the entrails of a sacrificed goat and threw them all over the Prophet.

Do you really believe he acted out of righteousness? Abu Lahab had already come to Muhammad in secret and asked, "If I accept your faith, what will it profit me?"

"You will be blessed by Allah, as all believers are," replied the Prophet.

Abu Lahab grew impatient. The Hashim had been granted a tithe for the water of Zamzam that the pilgrims drank; everyone accepted this. He asked again what special privilege would come to him if he converted. This time he was twice as haughty.

"To submit is to become humble for God's sake. Your reward will be exaltation in His eyes. What more could you want?" said Muhammad.

Naturally, Abu Lahab wanted much more. He left in a fury and redoubled his denunciations. He wasn't the only rich merchant and trader who feared the call of Islam. To a man they were terrified when their slaves began to follow the Prophet, who went among the poor in secret. In dim houses filled with smoke and the stench of utter want, he raised his hands and said, "Even as the fingers of my hands are equal, so are men equal. None has preference over another." A black slave named Bilal became an eager convert. When his master heard this, he had Bilal dragged by Qurayshi thugs out into the desert, where they beat him and stretched him out in metal armor under the merciless sun.

All the while he murmured, "God is One, God is One." When this was reported to his master, he ordered that Bilal be crushed under the weight of heavy stones. The torture had just begun when Abu Bakr happened to pass by. He ran to the master's house and threw money on the table to buy Bilal. The master hesitated—no doubt to keep teaching his slave a lesson—before he relented. Abu Bakr set Bilal free and began the practice of buying other slaves who had converted.

Panic rose among the Quraysh. After the first three years, the Prophet began to preach in public. The number of believers was still less than forty. But the elders were no fools. They knew the danger of the message and feared a war among brothers. A God who brings all things to those who accept Him is hard to resist for long. Their only recourse was to run to Abu Talib, who as head of the clan extended his protection over Muhammad. Furious as the Quraysh were, they could not break the tribal code. Protection was absolute and had to be honored. If not, there would be endless warfare and blood in the streets.

Abu Talib refused to act. Time and again, his reply to the Qurayshi elders was, "Keep your silence and your dignity. Let us deal with Muhammad the way we must. Our sacred ways are not to be crushed." Abu Talib wouldn't break his promise to take care of his orphaned nephew as his own son.

The Qurayshi elders didn't give up. They found a strapping young man in the slave market and brought him before Abu Talib. "Take this one as your son and renounce the other. The trade can only benefit you," they argued. Abu Talib turned them out of his house with scorn.

I'll tell you what worries the Quraysh the most. It's the mystery of the word. How can this Koran, a stream of words delivered to an ordinary man, be stronger than their swords? Even surrounded by threats and ridicule, people converted, because they heard the voice of God in Muhammad's voice.

If you believe the rumors people spread, Muhammad's followers perform demonic rituals when gathered behind closed doors. If they only knew the truth. Muhammad preaches peace. He says, "The strongest wrestler has no strength compared to the man who can control his anger." Sometimes one of us Muslims—so we call ourselves, to denote that we have surrendered—fights back after being sorely provoked. When brought before the Prophet, he rebukes him gently. "The creation is like God's family. Everything that sustains it comes from Him. Therefore, He loves most whoever shows kindness to His family."

I would never say so in front of the Prophet, but Abu Lahab is the son of the Devil. He watches from behind the scenes like a snake waiting for its prey to come too near. He arranged for the Prophet's house to be vandalized by night. For a time it was necessary to post an armed guard at the gate. Until one day a message came that told Muhammad to send the guard away. God would protect him. Perhaps this sura, one small verse, inspired the Prophet to adopt a new tactic.

He said, "Our father Abraham smashed the idols of his people when they were gone. He mocked these petty gods as lumps of clay that were blind and deaf to the prayers of the idolaters."

After that Muhammad began to ridicule the idols planted all over the Kaaba, inside and out. At dawn he went to greet

the new pilgrims who came to Mecca during the holy months, and he challenged idol worship to their faces.

“If your idols, who have no eyes and ears, can protect you from my blasphemy, let them do their worst,” he declared. “They won’t avail you. In reality they are only the servants of God themselves. Why trust in the slave when you can accept the Master? He alone answers prayers and provides protection.”

When the pilgrims saw that none of their gods could harm Muhammad, a few became convinced and were converted. Abu Lahab could not tolerate this, so whenever word came that Muhammad was making his way to the Kaaba, he sent his own men to shout, “Close your ears! A madman is about to harangue you.” Their clamor drowned out the Prophet’s sermons. After that, he abandoned public preaching and held meetings at night, underground.

Nothing was lost on Abu Lahab, who now had the backing of the entire Quraysh tribe. Instead of crushing the faithful all at once, which even he did not dare, he decided to use a flyswatter. For every new convert to Islam, an old convert would be killed or driven out of Mecca by terror. Muhammad couldn’t be touched, not with Abu Talib’s protection. But almost everyone else was in danger, especially the servants and slaves who dared to believe differently from their masters.

One day I knocked on the door of an old *hanif* who had come over to our side. The door swung open with a creak. Inside there was no one. I went from room to room, calling out. The old man had vanished overnight, taking his family with him. A demonic symbol had been written in animal blood on the wall.

I ran to Muhammad and cried that the campaign by his enemies was intolerable. “Let me fight back. What else can be done with men who hate you?”

“Do you want to show how much you love your Creator?” he asked quietly.

“With all my heart,” I exclaimed.

“Then love your fellow beings first,” he said.

After many months neither side could break the stalemate. One man of God with forty followers against every powerful family in the city. Muhammad had no choice but to ask God to bring him a solution.

THREE

WARRIOR OF GOD

A JEWISH SCRIBE

What strange creatures we are. If you beat a dog, he cringes. If you beat a horse, he runs away. But if you beat a man, he sometimes starts to dream. Such dreams may take him to places you cannot imagine. Being a Jew, I dream all the time.

In my favorite dream, I'm running after bird-catchers. I used to do that for real, long ago. Every spring I'd lie in bed before dawn in my father's house, listening. The bird-catchers never missed a spring. You could hear their captives—finches, larks, and sparrows—singing in wicker cages. Other traders hung bells on their mules, so you would know they were coming from afar. The bird-catchers had no need.

“Did they sell nightingales?” Muhammad asked me one day. It was hot, a few months after he arrived in Yathrib. I was his everyday scribe, and yet there was nothing for me to write down. Nobody was rushing to his house with a divorce for him to judge or a missing bag of wheat that a neighbor had “found” in the street.

“Maybe they sold nightingales,” I said. “But they dipped the birds in dye to make them pretty, so you couldn't really tell what they were.” A boy couldn't tell, at least.

“Desert birds are gray, but in Paradise they will be brilliant red and green,” Muhammad mused. “And their songs will have no longing in them. There is no longing when you are close to God.”

“Do birds long for God?” I asked.

“All creatures long for God,” Muhammad replied.

He's a dreamer, you see, like me. But his dream holds people's lives together. These Muslims are new to us. They trekked to this faraway city, Yathrib, across the desert two hundred miles from Mecca. Sent by God, they say, as the Jews were sent out of Egypt. The newcomers call it their *hijra*, or "migration." I have no opinion. Maybe their God sent them. Maybe the constant opposition and hatred wore them down.

Here's a joke about being hated. A woman gives birth, and the midwife comes out to greet the father, who is nervously pacing up and down. "Good news," she says. "It's a baby boy, and he's healthy."

But the father still looks worried. "You're sure he's normal?" he asks.

The midwife nods. "He has ten fingers and ten toes. He has a wagging little penis. Oh yes, and he hates the Jews."

The first Muslim I met laughed when I told him that joke. He was a servant to Abu Bakr, who fled here with Muhammad. Affairs had gone from bad to worse in Mecca. Hatred simmered for twelve years after Muhammad met the angel. Abu Bakr built a special structure for prayer outside his house, what they call a mosque. It was obvious no one wanted Muslims defiling the shrines where they kept their idols. This mosque was just four walls open to the sky, where Abu Bakr knelt before God five times a day. That's what Muhammad told them to do. The walls were low, and anyone could look over to see what was happening; the sound of Abu Bakr's devotions filled the street. The elders of the tribe took this as a deliberate provocation.

Muhammad's enemies muttered that no amount of money was enough to keep him from being punished. Muhammad had already proven that the old idols couldn't harm him or his followers. And yet these enemies were right about money not being enough.

Abu Bakr owed his life to a sworn protector who kept the tribe at bay. This protector, Ad-Dughunnah, came one morning and pleaded with Abu Bakr to go inside his house to pray.

Instead of relenting, Abu Bakr gave him a hard stare and said, "I release you from your oath. The protection of Allah is all I need."

The hate soon boiled over. The clans of the tribe hatched a plot to get rid of Muhammad without starting warfare in the city. Each clan agreed to pick one strong young man who could wield a knife. As a group, the chosen assassins would set upon Muhammad, each striking him with his dagger. In that way, blame would be equal among all the clans in the tribe of Quraysh. Blood money would be paid to absolve the crime. The new religion would fade away like a parched rose whose water has been stolen. As everyone knew, Muhammad was the water of Islam.

A Muslim merchant was telling me the story, and I stopped him. "Weren't they his own people, the ones who wanted to kill him?"

"He has no people who stand outside God," the man replied.

The appointed night for the assassination arrived. The band of killers stood by the gate of Muhammad's house, holding vigil until he came out for his morning walk at sunrise. They failed to conceal themselves well enough, and inside Muhammad and his devoted young cousin Ali became aware of their presence and the looming danger.

Muhammad and Ali had little time to spare. Muhammad quickly devised an inspired plan. He took a nomad's cloak of green wool that people frequently saw him in. He wrapped Ali in it and told him to lie on his bed disguised as the Prophet.

Ali was reluctant, because he would be leaving Muhammad defenseless. Eventually he was persuaded to obey. Left alone, Muhammad began to recite a verse given to him in a revelation. When he came to the words "I have enshrouded them, so they cannot see," he understood what God wanted. Wrapping himself in a plain cloak, he departed from his house, walking past his assassins without any of them seeing him.

A few streets away he met an acquaintance, who nodded and passed. But the acquaintance was privy to the plot, and he rushed to Muhammad's house and exclaimed that he had just seen him on the street. The band of assassins swore that no one could have gotten past them during the night. To prove it, they sneaked up to the window of Muhammad's bedroom, where he lay asleep, wrapped in his favorite green cloak. The deception was revealed only at dawn when Ali emerged from the house and announced that his cousin had escaped.

Muhammad had made his way to Abu Bakr's. There would be no choice but to flee. Muhammad had received a message warning him of imminent danger. God's will was clear. To stay meant death for all.

With several packed camels, Muhammad and Abu Bakr left Mecca with a small party in haste. They spent three days in a mountain cave outside the city. Ali was left behind to settle Muhammad's business affairs. When he was absolutely convinced that God wanted him to go, Muhammad agreed to cross the desert to his new home in the north.

After I heard this tale, curiosity got the better of me. One afternoon when I saw that he was particularly relaxed and in good humor, I asked Muhammad, "Do you always trust your messages?"

"It is Allah who trusts me," he said.

"But he sent you into the wilderness. Is that a sign of love? Why didn't he just kill your enemies?"

Muhammad gave me a look. He knows more about the Jews than you can imagine, and the look said, *You're speaking about yourself*. He waited a moment as if deciding what he could tell me.

"I had a wife who believed in me when no one else did," he said gravely. "She heard every word from God and accepted it, to the point that where I ended she began and where she ended I began. Our faith was a second marriage. Her name was Khadijah. One day she was coming to my room

with a bowl of soup in her hands. At that moment, just as I heard her footsteps, God spoke to me about her. She came into the room and I said, ‘My dear, the Lord tells me that you are blessed. A place awaits you in the Garden, where there is no weariness and only quiet.’ She didn’t smile, but only gazed at me. We shared the same thought: *this is Allah’s way of gently foretelling her death.*”

Sorrow came into Muhammad’s eyes. I was touched that he would confide in me, and I had the urge to embrace and comfort him. But the next moment his body stiffened. He said, “Because God tells me the secrets of life and death does not mean that I am the master of life and death. These are great mysteries. By God’s mercy I am closer to them than ordinary men. That is just as much a cause for grief as joy.”

He never confided in me again, yet I had the strongest feeling that he understood the Jews, because that’s how God commands us to live: close to the mystery, but never solving it. Our sorrow and our joy are entwined. Later I heard that Khadijah died soon after that message. It was three years before the Muslims fled Mecca. They call that year Muhammad’s year of grief, because his old uncle, Abu Talib, died around the same time. He never converted to Islam, but he blessed Muhammad. They tell me he was hounded on his deathbed by relatives who wanted Abu Talib to give orders against the new faith. He always refused.

One thing I’ll grant these Muslims. They pray quietly. They purify themselves and recite the verses taught to them by Muhammad. And they’re not lawyers. Before the Muslims arrived, my whole life was lawyers in the rabbis’ court. I sat cross-legged in court with my writing table on my lap, scribbling down endless arguments. The judges nodded on the bench, swatting flies that buzzed around plates of sweetmeats. Plaintiffs supplied judges with sweets to keep them in good temper. The lawyers thought they were wiser than the Torah. Them and their niggling minds. One stingy bastard docked me an hour’s pay, because he said I smudged a line.

“You smudge the truth, and they pay you more,” I pointed out.

He bellowed and kicked me out of court. After that, it was harder to get work with the rabbis, which is why I snatched the job offered by the Muslims. Yathrib has its share of Jews, and too many of us can write.

“You will not take down the Prophet’s holy words,” they said. “We have our own scribes for that. Your job is to follow legal proceedings, disputes, and daily affairs. When the Prophet renders a judgment, record every word. If he gives advice on any subject, record every word. This is important. Do you understand?”

I nodded. I wanted the job, didn’t I? A few Muslims had been trickling into Yathrib for several years, but nobody really noticed them. They made a tiny solemn group when Muhammad entered the gates at sunset. A few Jews invited them to take refuge here. In Arabia, if you worship one God, you want allies. Now that Muhammad is among them, his people don’t just feel safe; they feel that God has shown them the way. They’ve even proclaimed that Yathrib should have a new name: Medinat al-Nabi, “the city of the Prophet.” If they’re in a hurry, they just say Medina.

“Christians also write, perhaps more than the Jews,” said Muhammad. Because it was hot, I wasn’t writing, as I told you. When I was, he enjoyed watching me, with a look almost of wonder on his face. For a moment he wasn’t fifty-two with a gray beard, but a child again.

“Christians had to write to survive,” I said.

“Why is that?”

“Because the Romans hated their prophet, Jesus, and they would have killed the lot,” I said. “Luckily for them, the rich Romans were lazy. Many didn’t bother to learn to read and write.”

I caught myself, realizing that Muhammad might take offense. “I don’t mean you, sir. You’re not lazy. You work

yourself half to death.” He smiled, which was rather incredible. Any other rich man in Medina would have given me a swift kick for my insolence.

I went on. “The first Christians were commanded to read their scriptures. They didn’t leave it to priests. After a while, so many could read and write that they became useful as scribes. The Romans hired them in the provinces. Time passed, and whenever a new emperor got it into his head to persecute the Christians, his governors would say, ‘You can’t. Tax collecting will fall apart without our filthy little Christians.’ In a few centuries the whole empire became Christian.” The irony pleased me.

Muhammad was intrigued. “First they persecute you. Then they need you. In the end, they convert to your religion.”

He repeated this to himself several times that day. Later on, I figured out why. No one in power needs the Muslims, not yet. There are not many of them, not enough to form a decent armed tribe. He’s worried about how they’ll survive. God commanded him to spread the good news, like Jesus, but how?

The Muslims told me that in Mecca Muhammad would sit near the town well every morning teaching his followers. If a servant came by, he could sit and listen along with everyone else. Even a slave could sit and learn.

The high-born people didn’t like this, but they wouldn’t draw near, because you don’t talk to a respectable man with slaves hanging about. Finally one of the elders came to Muhammad, saying, “I wish to have words with you, brother. Send the slaves away.”

Muhammad nodded as if he consented, but suddenly he couldn’t speak, and his face broke out in a sweat. Receiving no answer, the elder stormed off. A little after that, a new message came to Muhammad: “Do not drive the believers away or you will be among the evildoers.” So he had no choice. He had to save every idol worshiper in Mecca, rich or poor. The task seemed impossible. When Muhammad went to the fat elders of his tribe, they ridiculed the notion that one of

their own was chosen by God. When he went among the poor, they were too easy to convince. They would hope for favors and money from a wealthy merchant who suddenly paid attention to them.

“Did he find an answer?” I asked one of the Muslims.

The man shrugged. “Would we be here if he had?”

I meet Jews who are suspicious of the newcomers. I tell them that Muhammad is like Moses leading his lost children, but they mock, “And Yathrib is their promised land? Where’s the milk and honey? They should keep moving.”

I went to Muhammad and asked him if this was their promised land.

“That’s not my concern,” he replied. “God can find his own anywhere on earth. There’s something more important.” He pointed to a pile of scrolls on the floor. “This is God’s book. It has been growing for twelve years now. Nothing is more precious. You are people of the Book, so you understand.”

I drew back. If I said yes, I understand, would that make me a bad Jew? Is it a sin for me to work for a Muslim whose book isn’t mine? I hear the whispering in my mind, and to the people of the Torah this is what I say. If the messiah comes tomorrow and drives the Gentiles into the sea, maybe he will turn to me and say, “Eli, dear boy, sit at my right hand. I will be busy rebuilding the Temple of David. You take care of business while I’m away.” Then I would rule the world and nobody’s God would be before mine.

But there is no messiah, no Temple, no way around the Gentiles. I must wander like Joseph among the unbelievers, only I don’t weep. I adapt. And if these Muslims have found their own Elijah or even Moses, why should I kick the cow that gives me milk? My job is to write, not to judge. I’ve never seen Muhammad when he gets his messages, which keep coming, they say. New scrolls appear around him. Some days I’m not allowed in the door. Other days I see him begin to

change. His eyes roll upward; he trembles slightly, like a sparrow you hold in your hand. At the first sign I'm driven out of the room.

One thing I do know. Muhammad hands down their laws, just like a Moses. So if a prophet says, "God told me this," and his followers say, "We believe you," how can anyone disprove it? When I am safely behind my own door I can light candles remembering the Maccabees, who died as heroes defending the Jews, and I can curse our enemies. There's time enough for that. Always time enough for that.

Muhammad hasn't passed fifty without gaining some canniness, and he saw these warring thoughts in my mind. One day he told me to put down my writing tablet. "Look in my eyes," he said. "Do you see a fraud and a liar?"

I was too startled to reply.

"If you don't see a fraud and a liar," he said, "then I am telling the truth. God has made me His messenger."

I was embarrassed and mumbled something, I can't remember what.

Muhammad became stern. "Don't risk your soul. God commands me to save the Jews. He wants me to save the world."

Muhammad paused, and for a moment I was afraid he wanted me to make a choice, then and there. But he looked away instead and continued.

"For three years I couldn't even tell my uncles and cousins. Do you know what anxiety I felt? To know from God's mouth that all sinners are damned. He sees everything. He marks every deed we do on earth, and at the last day the damned will testify against themselves out of their own mouths. Can that day be far off?"

My heart was pounding. There was steel in his voice as he spoke, but not the steel of a madman. Muhammad got his strength from something outside his body. A force like lightning that can turn a soul to ashes or forge it in flames.

I stammered, “Don’t ask me to believe. But I can see. You survived the fire.”

He looked surprised. “Do you see that? Because it’s true.”

I lie awake wondering if the world will come to an end before the next sunrise. My mind still goes back to my childhood when I waited for the bird-catchers. Sometimes a bird would die suddenly. Maybe they gave it the wrong food, or maybe it had a broken heart from being separated from its mate. The bird-man would pluck the feathers of a dead bird and weave a fantastic cap for himself, glittering with every hue, more than a rainbow. You could hardly tell the catcher from the catch.

I hope Muhammad gets to see the birds in Paradise, as God has promised. And I hope I’m not left out when that day comes.

FATIMAH, MUHAMMAD'S YOUNGEST DAUGHTER

The faithful are readying for war. The night I found out, I had a nightmare. A pack of hyenas brought down a lion, and they started to gnaw at its carcass while it was still alive. The hyenas laughed as they pulled out the victim's entrails; the lion roared with defiance as it died. I woke up trembling and uttered one word: *Father*.

I must have shouted without knowing, because Ali, sleeping beside me, rolled over and mumbled. I held very still until he fell asleep again.

Is this coming war a test from God?

The summer caravans leaving Mecca all travel by Medina on their way to Syria. They are Qurayshi caravans, most of them, and the grandest have a thousand camels. From a height it must look like a trail of ants creeping from horizon to horizon. Most of our Muslims are poor. A few farm on the tiny plots of land they are begrudged. Many others try to trade, but struggle in a foreign city where no tribe is their own.

Hauling a small cart of crops to market with limited prospects for the week, a hungry Muslim is passed on the road by camels loaded with silk, jewels, and spices. The temptation to raid is great.

When the raids first began, they were no different from the custom of poor Arabs trimming some extra fat from the rich. The caravans were disrupted for an hour and moved on. Ali was amused. "Half the time they can't find the caravans and come home empty-handed. The desert needs to be smaller."

It was sport, a game. The nomads have been playing it since the time of our ancestors. If captives are taken, they can be ransomed. In the meantime, captives and captors sit around the same campfire and sing songs. One never hears of killings, because then a blood feud would erupt, and that means trouble on both sides.

Now everything has changed. It started when one of our real fighters, Abdullah ibn Jahsh, went south on the trail close to Mecca, risking greater danger. His raiding party found a small caravan camped in a palm grove. Three timid merchants guarded a few scrawny camels. When Abdullah's band descended on them, the first arrow from Abdullah's bow pierced a merchant in the heart. The shot was intentional. Shocked, the other two fell to the ground in surrender. They were marched to Medina, and Ali's amusement changed. The mob didn't greet Abdullah as a hero, but as a violator of the peace.

"Look at the rabble." Ali pointed out the window at the grumbling people in the street, Jews and Arabs who had once welcomed us. They were disturbed and angry. Sport had gone too far. Rumors spread like wildfire that Abdullah had defiled the holy month of Rajab, when no fighting is permitted. His attack was unholy, and many thought that he had the blessing of Muhammad to commit violence. Confidence in the Prophet was badly shaken.

"It's not our holy month," Ali argued. "It belongs to the idol worshipers. How can we be bound by our enemy's customs?" Ali fumed when word came that a few poets in the marketplace were making up songs ridiculing the Prophet.

We had been married only a year. The whole time I hid my face from the raids and never asked if Ali was part of them. Then he brought me the news. A message had come to Father from Allah: "It is permitted to fight." The message was longer than that. It spoke of those who had unjustly been persecuted for worshiping one God and driven from their birthplace. God was favorable to Abdullah's raid. A lesser crime by a Muslim was forgiven when the weak were oppressed, because that is a

greater crime before God. But all I heard was the phrase that changed our lives. *It is permitted to fight.* Ali's excitement matched my fear.

"Faith, purity, blessings," he said. "They aren't enough to defeat evil. Sometimes it takes blood."

He squeezed my hand in reassurance, but it wasn't his words that frightened me. It was the look in his eyes. I couldn't bear to look back. A battle. Whenever it came, he would rush to fight on the front line. A defender of the faith could do no less. I've never seen a battle, but you don't have to see one to know who dies first. I took my hand away, so he couldn't feel my fear.

"Aren't we here to bring peace?" I asked.

"If we are wiped out, there will never be peace. This isn't an evil choice, because it's no choice at all. The enemy has decided to come for us."

When I was a girl, a runner pounded on the gate demanding to see Father. His face was bloody, and he was filthy from running all the way to Mecca from the hills. A small party of the faithful had sought a remote place to worship in peace, but the Quraysh had them followed. In the middle of their prayers they were set upon by attackers with knives and clubs. My father blanched and listened gravely to the runner's account. The faithful were strong young men; they drew as much blood as they lost. It wasn't enough for the Quraysh to forbid trade with anyone who dared to follow the Prophet. They resorted to torture, especially if one of the faithful was a slave. An adopted son of my mother's was stabbed in the Kaaba itself.

Ali's eyes reminded me of all this. I prayed for God to give me words. "At least you won't have to buy your shield back," I said.

His face flushed scarlet. It was cruel to bring back bad memories. I felt ashamed. But how much crueler for warriors to butcher each other.

Here is how Ali lost his shield. When we came to Medina last year, Father had begun to unite the people. He brought peace between the Jewish tribes and the Arab tribes, who had been fighting for three generations. For the Jews it was an eye for an eye; for the Arabs it was blood feud. Both sides could never forgive any harm done to their clans. But a hundred years of violence had exhausted them. They turned to Father, who brought his reputation for fairness with him to our new home. A peace pact was drawn up, and both sides placed their hands on one another, swearing to keep the city safe and to protect the poor.

When everyone was gone Father shook his head. “Oaths aren’t enough. Pacts and treaties aren’t enough.” There had to be other ways to bond the tribes of Medina, because he knew that the Quraysh would come one day. He chose a partner for each Muslim man among the Arabs of the city, forming a brotherhood. Yet he knew the strongest bond was blood, and blood means marriage. I was innocent of all this. A seventeen-year-old thinks of a husband, I know, but Father was in grief over losing Mother. I sat at his feet every day, and even though he would marry again, he would never love anyone as he had loved her. Between us it was understood.

How amazing one day when I entered his room and Abu Bakr smiled at me. He always smiled to see me, but a woman knows the difference. He wasn’t smiling like an uncle. There were only a few men who lingered at our house, men trusted by Father to tell him the truth at all times. Umar, who is very wise, also began to smile at me, and Ali, the cousin who had been part of our household as long as I can remember.

“A smile was all I had,” Ali would recall with a grimace.

It was true that he was poor. When they heard that Father needed a son-in-law to strengthen the faith, Abu Bakr and Umar offered themselves in open proposals. Father held up his hand. Everyone waited. Time went by, and still no decision. Ali could hardly stand it. I wasn’t a child anymore asking him to look for my doll, and he had sat in council with men for

eight years. Without money he couldn't even make a bridal gift. One day he came into Father's presence and sighed.

"What is it?" Father asked.

Ali was startled. "I said nothing, sir."

"Ah, I thought you were asking for Fatimah."

Father loved Ali dearly, and he gently suggested that Ali owned one thing of value, a shield chased with silver edges. He could sell that to get money for the bridal gift. Ali took heart and obeyed. Then Father came to me and announced that it was God's will for me to marry Ali. Would I consent?

Something tied my tongue. Fear of leaving my beloved Father? Ignorance of what passes between a husband and wife? Ali had hidden his desire so completely, out of respect for Father, that he hadn't even made sheep's eyes at me. Before I could find anything to say, Father smiled. "God has made you silent. I know in your heart that you agree." I realized he was right.

We were married here in Medina a year after Hijra. The Muslims, surrounded by strangers, were grateful for something to celebrate. My sister Ruqayah gathered all the women to cook the feast. The carpeted floor was crowded with dates, figs, lamb, and wine jars. It was like being home again. As many tears were shed for that reason as for joy. The whole company laughed when the richest guest, Uthman, who had married Ruqayah, rose to present a gift to the groom. With a flourish he brought forth Ali's shield. Uthman had paid for it, but refused to keep it. Father's eyes twinkled. There are ways to sell things and still not lose them.

It displeased my husband to be reminded by me now that he couldn't buy his shield back himself. I sighed. The same shield would protect him when the battle arrived. What strange paths Allah takes to work His will.

"I can't stop you," I said. "If you are a *ghazi*, God be with you."

“What is a *ghazi* to you?” Ali asked. How could I find the words to reply without offending him? Already I felt the heat from his burning cheeks.

“A *ghazi* is someone who strives for the sake of God,” I said.

“And is there a limit to striving?”

I cast my eyes down. “No, dear husband.”

“Well, then. Peace be upon you.”

“And you.”

Ali seemed satisfied. A stranger would be baffled by this conversation, I know, and all that it meant for the future. Perhaps our whole destiny depended on a shifty word. *Ghazi* means striver, but it’s also what we call the raiders. It was an innocent term before Abdullah’s arrow drenched it in blood. Now no one strives for Allah in peace. The *ghazi* provoke fights with the Quraysh. They declare that Allah ordains them, and suddenly their raids are holy. The logic of men is hard to unravel from the logic of God. He must see a purpose to all this violence.

Troubled, I ran to Father when he was alone. He sits in the dark brooding when he isn’t in council. Medina has made him turn gray—but fierce too. His manner is so stern that some of the faithful fear him as much as they fear Allah.

“Why does God want blood?” I blurted out.

“A bold question from such a timid child,” he muttered. It was the closest to a rebuke I had ever heard from his lips. But I’d rather be loved for truth than meekness. I asked him again.

“God doesn’t want blood,” he said. “He wants warriors when the unjust persecute the just. The faithful are made strong by defending their faith. Otherwise they will scatter like leaves when the next storm comes.”

“But the *ghazi* provoke the enemy.”

“They strike before being struck. God forgives them. He knows that the enemy has done violence to us for fourteen years already. He wants the balance redressed.”

These were hard words to hear from Father. It was as if he were speaking in the mosque. But when I gazed into his eyes, they weren't fierce; they were pleading. He went to the window and closed the last open shutter, making it night in the room.

“Don't try to read my mind, child. It isn't mine anymore. God commands everything, even my thoughts. I must obey.”

I ran away to console myself. How easy for his enemies to say that Father is hiding behind God. How convenient that these raids that infuriate the Quraysh have a divine blessing. I had to know the truth. It was shameful for a daughter not to believe her father. I do still believe him. Yet in my mind's eye I saw Ali's corpse being dragged across the battlefield, leaving a track of blood in the sand. I had to know.

I broke into Abu Bakr's room in distress. He was doing something he didn't want me to see and barely had time to hide it.

“A sword?”

He sheepishly brought it out from behind his back. “This old arm can barely swing one. I practice every day.”

Abu Bakr is a second father to me. He read my heart. “The Prophet isn't here to bring messages. He is here to bring justice. Look around you. The tribes of the city keep the peace. We have laws and safe places to worship. God protects the sons of Abraham as long as they obey him and bring his words to pass.”

I felt a spark of hope. “Then He won't allow any Muslims to be killed?”

Abu Bakr gave me a wry smile. “Certainly not a man as strong and brave as Ali.”

I blushed. “I wasn't asking just for myself.”

“Then hear me. If we fight for justice, it isn’t violence. It’s a righteous act. When righteousness remains passive, the unjust show no mercy. The nature of evil is to spread, like a contagion.”

This was a long speech for him, but not a practiced one. I know Abu Bakr. He risked everything in Mecca to stand beside Father. He broke blood ties and walked among assassins with his head held high. If anyone knows what a righteous act is, he does.

Abu Bakr hesitated. “I don’t think you realize. The Prophet led one of the first raids. He became a *ghazi* when God commanded him.”

I was shocked, and yet I wanted the truth. Abu Bakr assured me that none of the early raids drew blood, or were meant to. Father had ridden out, because one of the greatest enemies of the faith owned the caravan. Like the others, this raid came to nothing, because the scouts couldn’t locate the camel train in the vast reaches of the desert.

If that made me grateful, it was only for a moment. Allah began to weave a mystery around us, and like men stumbling in the dark the Muslims wandered into a scene whose outcome was known only to Him. It began when news came that the richest caravan of the year was heading home to Mecca. Its leader, Abu Sufyan, hated the Prophet. He accused him of wanting to destroy the tribal order, but we all knew Abu Sufyan’s secret grievance. When a small group of frightened Muslims had fled across the sea to seek refuge in Abyssinia, his own daughter was among them. The Quraysh sent an ambassador to convince the Negus, king of Abyssinia, to send the refugees back to Mecca. Lavish bribes were laid at his feet, and evil might have won the day. That is, if not for a leader of the refugees who read verses of the Koran to the Negus, who as it turned out was a Christian. Hearing the word of God and knowing how dearly we Muslims held the prophet Jesus, the king sent the ambassador home in scorn.

Abu Sufyan never forgot his loss, for which he held Father to blame. His persecution was ruthless. "But now he's coming within our grasp," Ali said. He pressed Father to attack the caravan. At one stroke he would have revenge on his enemy Abu Sufyan and seize wealth for the suffering Muslims. On its long trek, the caravan had to stop at the Well of Badr for water. It was a perfect place to lie in wait.

Suddenly the streets were full of noise, as if the men were preparing for a festival. I hid inside, praying that Father wouldn't concede to this bloody adventure. It wasn't his decision alone. He wasn't the military chief; he had to seek counsel from all the leading men. The air was filled with piercing calls to war. Volunteers ran to the central square. Delirious with dreams of plunder, seventy Muslims who had come from Mecca volunteered. To everyone's astonishment, more than two hundred more from among the converts in Medina volunteered.

Ali ran in with an exultant look. "Soldiers have sprouted like wheat sown with God's hands." For the first time, the faithful had more than devotion on their side. They had numbers.

Foolish dreamers. They marched out of Medina like nomad boys pretending to be the Roman army (not that any had ever seen Romans, who could be invisible gods for all we knew). Women stood at the gates singing Bedouin war cries to make their men strong in battle. I lay in my darkened room with a pillow pressed to my face, but I heard their shrieks, which were like wild animals.

How foolish we are here believing we act for ourselves, when God is the only mover. He began to play cat and mouse, not telling either side which one was the cat. Abu Sufyan had good spies, and one of them, seeing the march out of Medina, ran up the trail to warn him of the ambush at Badr. Abu Sufyan was crafty and intelligent. He immediately turned his caravan off the trail toward the sea, hoping to march around Badr and get his water by trade with the nomads who control the coastal roads. At the same time he sent a runner to Mecca.

This runner caused panic when he arrived. He tore his shirt and screamed hysterically. “Merchants of Mecca, heed me! Your goods are never coming back to you. Muhammad is stealing your money and your camels. Heed me or be lost!”

A girl must never show how much she knows about boys, or women about men. But we all knew that Meccans weren't fighters, except in show. Battle was a dance where the negotiations for peace came before any fighting broke out. Craftiness brought more victories than a sword. Yet this naked threat to their wealth enraged the Quraysh, and one of father's chief tormentors, Abu Jahl, blocked any talk of a treaty. He quickly assembled a thousand soldiers to march to Badr. “How many men can Muhammad have?” Abu Jahl argued. “Fifty? A hundred?” Suddenly fired with courage, the Qurayshi army left Mecca with the same festive air and passing of the wineskin as our men left Medina. God made both sides believe they were the cat.

When Father and our men arrived at the Well of Badr, no one was there. They waited anxiously, and eventually two water carriers appeared to fill their jugs. They were captured and bound, then led before Father after a sound beating had loosened their tongues.

“Where is the caravan you bring water to?” he demanded.

The two water carriers were bewildered. “Caravan? We come ahead of the army of Abu Jahl, which is a few days away.”

At this the Muslims almost lost heart. They realized that there would be no plunder, and worse, instead of overcoming thirty or forty guards who traveled with Sufyan's caravan, a bloody-minded army was coming for them. For the first time, the wiser heads suspected that God was weaving a mystery. Or was it a trap? Abu Bakr rose and argued that God wanted a battle to settle the Qurayshi threat.

“They threw us out of the tribe. They branded us as a band of traitors,” Abu Bakr pointed to Father, who sat silently as his

chiefs held council. “Our very Prophet they ridicule and mock. God cannot abide these evils. We must stand and fight.”

Abu Bakr’s speech rallied the seventy Muslims from Mecca. To everyone’s astonishment, the new converts pledged to fight without surrender. Only a few voted to return home to Medina, citing as their goal plunder from a caravan, not war.

Father thanked his men and retreated into his tent. Up to that moment, God had never asked him to lead an army. He felt the dreadful guilt of someone responsible for the lives of many. At the same time, he trusted that God would lead his steps and guide his hand.

When Abu Jahl came over the last dune to confront the oasis at Badr, he couldn’t see the Muslim forces. They had camped out of sight, and many of the Quraysh were relieved. They had gotten news that their goods were safe; the caravan was out of Muhammad’s grasp. As true devotees of money, they saw no reason to fight once their god was safe. A band turned back to Mecca, including some of the Hashim and others who were anxious at the prospect of fighting their own relatives and friends. A new faith doesn’t turn a cousin into a stranger.

God’s game went deeper than blood ties. Abu Jahl had wild ambitions. He was already powerful, but by saving the caravan of his rival, Abu Sufyan, he had pulled off a coup. Soon word would be spread by every wandering poet in Arabia that Sufyan was the protector of the Quraysh, beloved by the gods. The only move that would surpass this was for Abu Jahl to defeat the Muslims and bring the Prophet to his knees. He argued for war, and with reluctant muttering the clan chiefs agreed to stay.

They drank wine in their tents to calm their nerves while a scout named Umayr climbed the dune that looked down on the Muslim camp. Umayr returned with a pale face and wild look in his eyes. Instead of seventy or a hundred men, Muhammad had gathered three times that many. The Meccans started muttering anxiously. Abu Jahl remained stubborn, however,

pointing out that the Qurayshi army was more than twice that size, almost three times, even after the recent defections.

“I’ve seen the faces of these Muslims,” Umayr replied. “They are set for death. You will not kill one of them before they have killed one of you.”

Abu Jahl publicly scorned this prediction. In his heart of hearts he realized that the old Bedouin game of ritual fighting and bickering was over. This new enemy would fight and never negotiate. There was another thing that only he and his chiefs understood. My father had taken the valley and surrounded the wells. Without water, the Quraysh had no choice but to fight, even though they were forced to climb uphill facing the sun to get in place. How could the gods have done this to them?

They had one hope to avoid massive bloodshed. All Arab battles began with single combat. Three men from each side, chosen from the cream of the armies, came out to fight hand to hand before the main forces charged. Often this was enough to end the strife, and if not, Abu Jahl trusted that his three champions would slay the other three and fill the enemy with fear.

I know you wonder how a woman can speak of these matters, so I must tell you that my worst fear came true. Ali was among the three chosen to fight hand to hand. He strode out into the morning sun with his sword and the very shield that had brought his love to my bed. As soon as the call to fight sounded, he rushed forward and within seconds had stuck his blade through the body of Walid ibn Utba.

I wept as he told me all that I have told you. “God held my hand, and He struck the blow,” Ali said. The man he had slain was an avowed enemy of the faith and the son of Utba, whose hatred was even greater.

Can a single thrust decide an entire battle? Perhaps this one did, for all three Qurayshi champions were killed and only one Muslim, who sustained a wound that proved mortal. The two armies had to engage. Abu Jahl knew that he still had

more than two fighters for every Muslim. But a powerful transformation had overcome my father. In the night God taught him how to be a warrior. It was revealed that the Muslims should form a tight band, raining arrows on the Quraysh as they stumbled down the hill, blinded and confused by the sun in their eyes. Only at the last second, when the enemy was close, should the Muslims drop their bows and charge with drawn swords.

Abu Jahl had no notion of such warfare. He had fought in desert skirmishes before. Even in the fiercest ones each fighter was on his own, and there were no tactics, just a melee as disorganized as boys having a mud fight. His men fell back under a hail of arrows. They tried to stagger forward, and another hail of arrows hit them. Still packed together, the Muslims charged. In panic the Quraysh dropped their arms and ran. The whole battle was over before the afternoon sun was halfway down the sky. When the enemy dead were counted, many were leading chieftains, and one was Abu Jahl himself.

Immediately the victors began to round up the wounded to slaughter them, but God sent Father a message that none were to be killed. It was enough to march them back to Medina and hold them for ransom. He stopped the wild looting of the enemy camels and weapons, decreeing that the spoils should be shared equally among all the clans who had fought so courageously.

“It was a day of joy,” I said quietly. At least my Ali had survived, which was joy enough. Until the next time.

He understood why I was solemn. “Dear wife, your father was not exulting. He knew that the Quraysh have reason for more revenge now and more attacks. No one could mistake the tears on his cheeks for tears of joy.”

The Prophet had foreseen the repercussions. Allah had tested him with anxiety, doubt, and bloodshed. Only then had He revealed who was cat and who was mouse. God, the all-powerful and all-knowing, planned every move on both sides.

He alone knew what was needed for the faithful to win. Therefore, nothing less than total obedience to His will was acceptable. Without that, the enemy would never relent. This victory at Badr would be the end of the Muslims unless Father heeded every revelation to the letter.

“Have you heard about the angels?” Ali asked. In the ecstasy of winning, soldiers had spread the word that a host of angels had appeared overhead as they fought, indicating that Allah was on their side. When Father heard that Gabriel himself had joined them, he nodded and smiled.

“Do you believe that?” I asked Ali. I had no idea what his reply would be. I knew what the old Ali would have said before he marched off. He would have revealed his doubts. A new Ali returned, though, and something about him made him seem like a stranger.

“Angels are good for the troops,” he replied. “None of them ran, even when we were outnumbered. Only God can inspire a man to fight under those conditions. Allah has revealed how we’ll survive.”

My heart sank. “Through war?”

Ali shook his head. “Not just war. Holy war.”

He was using a peculiar word new to my ears. *Jihad*.

IBN UBAYY, THE HYPOCRITE

I walk through Medina, and the same thought torments me. I was born to rule here. No more. It's all Muhammad now. I smile, and on every side they smile back. I am given respect, just as before. No one can see how my mind grinds and grinds.

Beside me is one of the last chiefs of the Khazraj tribe I can trust. I tell him, "The Prophet has created a paradise. Use your imagination. It's all around us."

He isn't immune to irony. "Soon the camels will be dropping manna. Be careful not to step in it."

How long did it take for me to lose everything? Four short years. The Muslims were hanging on by a thread back then. I was on the rise, because the warring tribes in the city looked to me to bring peace. The Jews were ready to forge an alliance with the Arabs. If I could stop the endless blood feuds, I would be the chief of chiefs. Some even whispered a daring word: Ubayy the king.

"The mosque," my companion says, warily pointing up ahead. We are going to pray, the two of us. It's not safe to speak ill of the Prophet this close to the mosque.

I hear you laughing. Ibn Ubayy a Muslim? You don't understand. Conversion is about power. The God of Muhammad has cast down the gods of Arabia. They have crumbled to dust.

I remember the day the warriors came home from Badr, two years ago. We were waiting along the city walls, ready to behold a broken column bringing the dead and wounded. We couldn't believe our eyes when we saw the corpse of Abu Jahl

instead, dragged on a bloody litter behind a mule. The wind turned that day. I felt a shudder run through me. If their God could crush the Meccans with a handful of soldiers, anything was possible. Six months later, my forehead was touching the ground in the mosque.

As we near the door to pray, my companion looks around nervously. We're lucky this morning. No one assaults us or spits on our feet. A few mutter an oath. *Munafiq*—"hypocrite." When I overhear them, I lower my head humbly. Isn't that what God commands the faithful to do, submit?

Kneeling in the cool dim space where the Prophet's word is law, I feel lonely. I once wore my people like a cloak, wrapped tightly around me. I rose step by step, keeping careful watch. Ambition isn't a banner you fly overhead as you march down the street. It's a ladder just tall enough to steal all the fruit from the tree. Preferably at night. Muhammad understands this, and so do I.

Hundreds of men surround me at prayer. As we murmur to Allah, a ripple runs through the crowd. Eyes cautiously peer to the right and left. The Prophet himself has entered. No one has to say so. His presence is enough.

I'm bold and lift my head as he passes. Age has not bent him, nor care made him weary. Why should they? He's the victor. His robe is gleaming white; he bestows a blessing with a wave of the hand. Half a dozen bodyguards form a shield around him, but through the cracks Muhammad spies me and frowns slightly. I'm not the only hypocrite in this paradise. We form a party, in fact. Arabs who jumped to the new religion because there was no other choice. I couldn't change my ways to suit the Prophet. He calls me a thorn in his side.

Once when I challenged him, he became too angry to speak.

"Don't turn your face from me," I said. "Embrace me. I'm the one you must save."

“First you must want to be saved,” he replied. “Your eyes must open to God.”

“Is that why so many lying in the street have their eyes closed?” I shot back. “Or is it because they’re dead?”

I went away holding back my anger, but my tongue betrayed me. I was overheard telling one of my cousins, “This is what comes of bringing strangers among us.”

So far no message from God has come to make me disappear, not the way so many others have disappeared. I mean the Jews. We had three tribes of Jews in Medina when Muhammad arrived. If they hadn’t planted the seed of one God, Muhammad would never have come here. The Jews made a garden in the desert for him. One day I was their champion, the judge who would bring peace to all the tribes. I woke up the next day, and their doors were shut against me. Muhammad would be their judge. Muhammad was the bringer of peace.

Then the tide turned against the Jews. The people tell a tale that could be true. One day a Muslim woman had come to market in the Jewish quarter. Sellers at their stalls called out, “Let’s see your face. What’s wrong, are you too ugly to behold?” They were used to ogling. Muslim women wear a veil.

On this day a goldsmith grabbed the woman and pinned back her clothes so that her face was revealed; he threw her to the ground, and when she arose, her clothes were snatched off, leaving her naked. A Muslim man heard the commotion, ran to the scene, and killed the goldsmith with his knife. In turn, the Jewish sellers killed him. A blood feud was ignited.

Muhammad laid siege to the Jewish quarter. And after fifteen days the dominant tribe, the Qaynuqa, surrendered. Having seen that seven hundred armed Jews could be summoned to fight against him, the Prophet felt the danger in his midst. He banished the Qaynuqa from Medina. How do the Jews feel now scraping for a living in the barren countryside and distant villages?

I went before him and pleaded their case. “We had fierce battles before you came to Medina,” I declared. “In one battle the leaders of both sides were slaughtered, and I was saved only because the Jews of the Qaynuqa defended me. They are strong. They will help defend you when the Meccan army marches on the city.”

Muhammad had just returned from Badr, and my timing was wrong. He was swollen with the arrogance of victory. Why did he need Jewish warriors? They were the real thorn in his side, not me. Their quarter of Medina became a ripe plum for the Prophet to pluck. He confiscated their property and divided it among the faithful.

From that day onward, I earned the name “hypocrite.” What name should I lay at the feet of the Prophet? In time the second tribe of Jews was banished. Those of the third tribe were called traitors for siding with the Arabs of Mecca. Was it true? They were traders. Their fortunes depended on going to Mecca, where the great market thrives. Perhaps the Jews only wanted for life to go on as it had in their fathers’ and grandfathers’ time. Perhaps they were unlucky, plotted against the Muslims, and lost. Suddenly there were beheadings in the street. Traitors were to die. Their women and children had to be sold into slavery. I was appalled.

No one could say whether the Prophet ordered this outrage. He simply turned his face the other way. At the very least that is what he did, and I am here to remind him.

“I am studying the Koran,” I tell him. “Does it not say that Islam confirms what came before?”

Muhammad nods.

“Does it not say that God sent down the Torah and after that the Gospels? I see here a sura that compares Jesus to Adam, since they were the only two men who had no earthly father.”

Muhammad nods again, giving no sign of how he feels toward me.

I go on, “And yet you drive out the Jews and call them enemies and traitors. Please clear up my confusion, dear master. Are they not also people of the Book?”

I’m saying all this in public, you see. The circle of those who constantly surround him are uncomfortable. For a second the Prophet’s eyes flicker in their direction. Is he saying, *If you love me, pluck out this thorn?*

But aloud he is calm and tolerant. “God is all-mighty. He sees all and knows all. He sees those who oppose Him, and they will pay the price. To oppose the faith must mean that someone’s heart is set against God, even if their lips pay service to the Book.”

His close circle murmurs at the wisdom of his reply. I consider myself lucky to have gotten off with a veiled threat.

Whatever anyone thinks of me, I am never asleep. The day I foresaw came. A year after Badr, the Quraysh mounted a new army and were marching on us. The enemy forces were larger this time and better armed. The gleam of their swords attracted birds from miles around. The enemy were thirsty for revenge. They hadn’t forgotten Abu Jahl and all their relatives who were killed alongside him. Muhammad called a council, and since all the chiefs attended, he couldn’t exclude me.

The Prophet had the first word. “We shouldn’t march out to meet the Quraysh. It is best that we defend the city from within its walls.” Knowing how outnumbered we were, I sided with him. This plan displeased the young, restless Muslims. They didn’t want to sit at home like women. Their voices cried out for war, which meant marching onto the field. They believed that Allah had given us victory before, and He would protect us now.

Muhammad waited for others to support him, and the older chiefs did. But the clamor for battle was too loud. Two days later, a force of seven hundred left the city. I rode beside the Prophet, and both of us could see in our mind’s eye the three thousand Quraysh we were about to meet.

The walls of Medina were still in sight behind us when Muhammad turned to me with a scowl. "Who are those?" he said, pointing to a small band of my soldiers. When I told him they were Jews, some of my truest allies, Muhammad exclaimed, "Back! All of you. We fight without you today."

I was stunned, but my mind didn't quit working. If the Prophet's army won, I would be excluded from God's miracle. If it fell, I would be branded as the reason.

"I want to be with you," I said. Not so much because it was the truth as that I needed another sign of his real motives.

Muhammad's voice softened. "No blame will fall to you. My wishes have been disobeyed already."

Suddenly I read his mind. He wanted my forces to defend the city from within. We were the last resort he had to carry out his plan. I raised my hand and whistled. My lieutenants looked confused, but when I pointed to the city gates, they passed the order along, and we retreated back into Medina.

My men were seen leaving, but not all left. I heard from one of my spies that the two armies had come within sight of each other the first night. Muhammad seized the best ground by making camp on the face of a high hill known as Uhud. The steep rock face at his back protected the troops from being surrounded. Muhammad was in a strong position unless one of his flanks gave way. In that case, the men were both exposed and trapped.

Gazing down from the hillside, Muhammad saw that his soldiers were outnumbered three to one. This didn't alarm him, as he knew the power of faith. In any other war the Muslims would lose; in holy war they would prevail.

The Quraysh were led by Sufyan, the wealthy merchant whose caravan was in peril before the battle at Badr. He was the wealthiest among the Quraysh, and his money bought them a huge cavalry. They outnumbered Muhammad's cavalry in armored camels fifty to one. Muhammad now heard the songs of women. The Quraysh brought their families with them.

They could not be routed without incurring shame. With this news, my spy had nothing more to report. Dawn would tell the tale.

A new spy came running at noon the next day, flush with excitement. “Allah has inspired the Prophet! Nothing can stop him!” Once he calmed down, I questioned him, and the news was stunning. Muhammad, knowing that he had to stop the cavalry from surrounding him, took fifty archers and posted them on a separate low hill. He commanded them to rain arrows down on the Quraysh. On no account were they to rush into battle, not to help their kin or to seize plunder if the enemy was losing.

The Meccan army charged first. Holding their ground on the side of Mount Uhud, the Muslims hurled stones while the archers on their flank shot volleys of arrows. The Quraysh fell back in confusion. In the onrush, their standard fell, and the standard bearer was killed. His brother rushed forward to raise the flag again. Out of the Muslim army Ali stepped forward. Everyone froze. This was the hero of Badr. Ali challenged the new standard bearer to a duel and killed him with the first blow.

Another brother of the standard bearer came out to retrieve the flag, and he too was killed in hand-to-hand combat, followed by his son. Their corpses made a piteous sight. The dueling had devastated Qurayshi morale. Sufyan couldn't rouse them. The war songs of their women and the steely tinkling of bells were but a vain attempt to spur them on.

“And you saw the victory?” I asked my spy.

“No, sir. I ran to tell you, as victory is certain. Allah has inspired the Prophet.”

I sent him away. Enough of that. My men, the ones defending the city walls, were in place, tense and waiting. No women sang for them. Everyone was overcome with dread. I could have told them the good news. Instead, I took myself home to ponder fate. The first time Muhammad marched to

Medina in triumph, he seized my power. This time, once he accused me of fleeing the battlefield, he'd take my life.

Exhausted, I fell into a troubled sleep. Pounding on the door woke me, and I heard one of my spies shouting for joy. *Is this it? Have all the gods abandoned me?* I secretly thought. But I flung open the door and exclaimed, "Praise Allah!"

Only to see the man's blanched face and the tracks of tears in the dirt on his cheeks.

"Lost!" he cried, sinking to his knees.

I didn't wait for details. If Muhammad had been beaten, that meant three thousand Quraysh mad for vengeance would be laying siege to Medina. I ran to the ramparts to reinforce my men with boys and even women, who could throw stones and pour boiling water on any enemies who tried to climb the city walls.

It's strange when you are about to die and don't know who to pray to. My men were simple. They prayed to Allah with fervent hearts. A handful looked to the sky instead of bowing to earth. I imagined they were praying to the gods of their fathers. As for me, I wouldn't pray until the moment a Qurayshi sword was about to plunge into my chest. I should have had a clear idea at that moment which god wanted me for his own.

And yet the attack never came. Before nightfall a rider appeared on the horizon. I gave permission for the gates to swing open. Once before me, he related a tale I could hardly believe. The battle of Uhud was won. The Muslims killed the enemy's courage, and to save their fallen the Quraysh left camp. Seeing that the spoils of war were in their grasp, the archers couldn't resist. Disobeying Muhammad's orders, they left their post to loot the enemy tents and steal the camels.

A chief on the enemy side, Khalid, the son of Walid, was in charge of their cavalry. He immediately spotted the opening and ordered his troops to charge at the Muslims' exposed flank. Suddenly the crushing weight of their numbers came

down on the Muslims. They were surrounded, and their only escape was to retreat uphill on the side of Uhud. In the confusion, the Prophet was set upon and nearly killed before his men could pull him to safety, seriously wounded.

It was the end. All the Quraysh had to do was to pursue the Muslims. But inexplicably, they didn't push forward. The Quraysh allowed Muhammad and his army to escape.

Amazed, I asked, "Where are they now?"

"Coming home," the rider replied, still gasping from distress and fatigue. "See the dust?" He pointed to the horizon, where a line of dirty brown smudged the air.

"Are they running with the Quraysh behind them?"

He shook his head. "The enemy remains in camp. No one pursues us."

How could this be? Perhaps Allah really was on the Prophet's side and had clouded the minds of the enemy. Perhaps Sufyan thought too much like a merchant instead of a general. He didn't want Medina turned into an enemy fortress that would never trade with him again. For whatever reason, the cloud of dust swelled until it reached high overhead. Shrouded inside was the Muslim army, bearing their wounded Prophet home.

Should I move to seize my power back? I wanted to, but my hand was stayed. Too many have converted to Islam. They won't follow an infidel anymore. And there's another thing. Muhammad's God did keep the city from being attacked. It just took a rout to make it happen.

I begged audience with the wounded Prophet to see for myself if he was really alive or on the verge of death. It took two days before I was allowed to enter his room, and by that time he was sitting up in bandages, weak but ready to get strong again.

"What happened?" I asked, keeping my forehead to the floor in case he saw something in my eyes I didn't want seen.

“They disobeyed God,” he said grimly. “They stopped fighting for Him.”

“Did God tell you that?”

“He didn’t have to. Anyone who isn’t fighting for God defeats himself.”

I felt Muhammad reach down and lift my face from the floor. “Including you,” he said. “I would lose any battle to win a great soul.”

I can’t help now but hear those words over and over. With half my heart I praise Allah sincerely. I’m not the deep-dyed hypocrite they suppose. With the other half of my heart I fear Allah. Perhaps He is all-knowing and all-powerful. Or is He simply crafty beyond imagining?

UMAR, THE CLOSE COMPANION

It never ended. Skirmishes, feints, raids, and attacks. The struggle was wearing us down. One day the word came that our implacable foe in Mecca, Abu Sufyan, had taken the profits of a whole caravan to buy weapons and mercenaries. Everything was closing in. The next day we heard that the hill stronghold of Taif would resist Islam to the last man. Syria refused peace terms, inflamed by lies about the Prophet. The Bedouin chiefs on the coast drifted from our side to the Meccans like waves on the beach.

And yet he goes on. A recent revelation comes to his lips: “Allah taxes not one soul beyond its limits.”

I am *sahabi*, one of the companions who has been by the Prophet’s side since the beginning. No one has kept a closer eye on him. Closeness doesn’t reveal his secrets, though. One waits for clues, like watching a lion who seems to sleep and then gives one small twitch before he leaps. A few months ago there was a lull in the raids and killings and betrayals. I found the Prophet kneeling in his garden. At first I hung back, so that I wouldn’t interrupt his prayers. He looked up and beckoned me.

“Watch,” he said, pointing at the ground.

A small anthill lay in front of him. Carefully the Prophet put a balled-up piece of bread next to it. At first only one or two ants came out to scout. They touched the bread with their feelers, then scurried back inside. In a minute dozens of ants trickled out to pick at the dropped food. I must admit I found nothing unusual to see. The Prophet was brandishing a twig,

which he used to gently push the ants away. Every time he did this, more ants rushed out of the ground to fill in the gap.

“This is our situation,” he murmured. “No matter how many enemies we drive away, more are sent after them.” He cocked his head quizzically at me. “What would you have me do? The faithful can’t face attack forever.”

“Do you want me to show you?” I asked in return. He nodded. With my sandal I kicked the anthill, sending it flying. I stamped on the flattened ground, and the hole disappeared. The ants around the bread ball scattered in confusion.

“If God wants us to fight our enemies, then He wants us to crush them. Mount a massive attack,” I said. “Every Muslim in creation will rush to fight. Do nothing, and the Quraysh will gather more allies, like flies to rotting meat.” On the wind we had heard of powerful tribes that were being bought off by Mecca with promises of plunder. The banished Jewish tribes were constantly trading with the enemy and nursing their dark grievances.

The Prophet picked up an ant on his fingertip and examined it. “Tomorrow more will come out of the ground. You can’t kill them all.”

“I can kill enough. I can kill until Allah tells me to stop.”

I had worked myself half into a rage, but the Prophet gazed at the destroyed anthill in sorrow. “God has something better in mind,” he murmured.

“Better than total victory?”

The Prophet turned away and went back into the house. That’s what I mean about getting a clue to his mind. When you glimpse one, it is veiled. In the short run, events turned out the way I foresaw, but it was Mecca that mounted the massive attack, not us. It was in the spring two years after Uhud. This time the Quraysh were preparing for a long siege against Medina. Word came of ten thousand infantry led by a cavalry of six hundred horses. Our army was a third that size. Brave

Muslims went to bed only to wake up wide-eyed, because they heard the clang of iron horseshoes in their nightmares.

My nightmare was just as horrifying, but more real. When we were routed at Uhud, it took every fiber of strength to remove the wounded Prophet safely from the field. Trailing behind the retreat, I glanced over my shoulder. With shrill war cries the camp followers from Mecca had rushed onto the bloody ground, maiming and mutilating the fallen. They were human vultures, and the leader wasn't a savage, but Hind, the wife of Sufyan himself. I wonder if she spied me, because her face was like a demon's. I saw her raise a small curved blade, and when she brought it down, a wounded Muslim had lost his nose and ears. Sickened, I turned and galloped away. Later I heard that some women returned to Mecca wearing necklaces of body parts sliced from the dead and dying.

Rumblings spread through the city after that defeat. It took all of the Prophet's skill to calm the bickering chieftains. One bitter faction wanted to punish the reckless young warriors who had ignored the Prophet's plan to defend Medina. There was even more disgust over the archers who had abandoned their post to loot the enemy camp. But the Prophet said quietly, "All that is good comes from Allah. All that is ill is my fault." His humility swayed the chieftains, even as blood was shed among clans in Medina's back streets at night.

We gathered in council to argue about how to meet the massive army marching toward us. Spies had ridden ahead to warn us that we had only a week to prepare. The worst confusion is that born of panic. The Prophet sat silently, while the chieftains tore apart each other's plans. One side shouted that Badr had been won by hitting the enemy full on and trusting in Allah. A quieter, more cautious faction pointed out that staying home to defend Medina from the inside would have avoided the humiliating defeat at Uhud.

The Prophet turned to the quiet faction. "You do not call upon God to bring us victory?"

“I would thank God if He brought us survival,” one of the chiefs muttered.

The Prophet grew stern. “Where is your faith?” But he knew well enough that there was near famine already in the city. Reciters roamed the streets crying out verses from the Koran to raise morale. People listened, but continued to tremble.

I stood up among the assembly. “The Prophet has taught us that faith has three parts. One part lies in the heart, another in our words, and the last in our deeds. Every action is holy. Therefore, this must be a holy battle, not a battle of fear. We should rejoice in being tested.”

Maybe I raised a few sunken hearts with this kind of boldness. But we all knew that there was a fourth part of faith, and it belonged only to the Prophet, the one man who could hear directly from God. We waited in nervous, rustling silence. He rose to his feet.

“Our enemies fight against God, and therefore they are defeated in advance. Not knowing this, they assemble a great, futile army. But ten thousand blind men cannot defeat a handful who can see. Let me ask you, then, what do you see? If you tell me that you see a foe who hopelessly outnumbered us, then are you not as blind as they?”

A mixture of bafflement and discontent greeted these words. A voice cried out, “Tell us what you see.”

The Prophet shrugged. “I took a walk out of town yesterday. I saw hills and rocks and trees the same as you. But this time God showed them to me with new eyes, and I rejoiced.” He smiled beatifically. “Is it not wonderful how God brings us victory in His very creation?”

The assembly was more baffled than ever by his words. A few of the *sahabi* who knew him well realized he was about to unveil a teaching.

“Allah is all-merciful. He asks nothing of our souls except what he has already planted in them,” Muhammad raised his

voice to silence the muttering doubters. “I will give you a plan, but never forget my words. *God is all-merciful*. This is worth more than victory, more than life itself.”

Muhammad explained how the rocks, hills, and trees that he loved to walk among surrounded the city on three sides. An army couldn't march through them without being picked off; horses couldn't gallop through without losing their footing. Medina had only one open side, to the north. If we could stop the enemy's horses there, they would lose most of their advantage. The tide would swing to us, because the Qurayshi infantry knew that in hand-to-hand combat a Muslim protected by his faith was worth three mercenaries fighting for loot.

“Their warhorses have seen bloodshed. They won't run from the glint of steel or the clash of swords,” said the Prophet. “So we must give them something they've never seen before. Only the unknown can frighten a warhorse.”

By this time the assembly was hanging on to his every word. I don't know if God enjoys creating suspense; if the Prophet does, it's a small sin. “What we need is simplicity itself. It is written that long ago the Persians terrified the enemy by digging a deep trench in the front lines. If the walls are steep enough, no horse will plunge into such a trench. They will pull up short at the last moment in panic. We will defend ourselves against the siege by fighting from behind our trenches.”

This strategy was delivered so skillfully that no one had time to consider the vast labor it would take to dig a single ditch deeper than a horse is tall, even when only on the north side of the city. The enemy army would be upon us in seven days, which meant that we had a mere six days to prepare our fortifications.

I tell you, those six days were the noblest of my life. Medina worked with one back, digging night and day. Every child was given a shovel to work beside his father. Women hauled away dirt in baskets and took turns bringing food and water. The Prophet himself was seen digging, his white robes

dirtied, his face caked with dust. All the better to goad our men to dig until their arms burned and trembled with exhaustion.

As I was breaking my back, my heart repeated encouraging words given by God in His book:

*Lo, I swear by the afterglow of sunset,
And by the night and all that it enshrouds,
And by the moon when she is at the full,
You will journey to higher and higher worlds.*

Wasn't I doing that now? To mortal eyes I was no more than a sweaty soldier squeezed into a ditch beside a thousand other soldiers. Yet in my soul I was working toward a higher world. Nothing stronger can drive a man onward. When I fell into bed at night, I dreamed of Paradise. No more did the horrifying sight of women mutilating fallen bodies trouble me.

The Prophet surveyed the work, sending in fresh replacements when a section of the trench fell behind. The fierceness of the task seemed to please him.

Legends were already circulating about him, and I remembered one. The Prophet has a large band of horses that he loves. Being a child of the desert, he grew up with Bedouins, who took their favorite mares inside the tent with them at night, for fear that raiders would steal them while they slept.

One day the Prophet had run his horses far out into the sands without water. In the distance an oasis came in sight. The animals were desperately thirsty; they bolted toward the oasis as soon as they smelled it. The Prophet watched them run away. At the last moment before they reached water, he rose in his stirrups and gave a sharp whistle, signaling for them to come back.

Most of the horses ignored the whistle, but five mares turned and returned to his hand. These alone he selected for breeding. He said, "A horse can be whipped into running

faster. With discipline it can be made to fight in battle. But what God values is complete loyalty, and that appears only when a soul meets the sorest test.”

You see? We were loyal mares in a moment of desperation, which is why the fiercer the danger, the happier he grew.

Finally the horizon was filled with black specks that advanced under a thin brown layer of dust. The specks grew into human shapes, and in less than a day the ranks of foot soldiers, cavalry, and fighters on camels filled our vision. The siege began. We had made life harder for the invaders by harvesting the crops early and stripping the land of forage. The Prophet emptied the city of men and boys over fifteen, stationing them on the hill above the trench. No one was allowed to go home at night; all were ordered to pray in loud voices and to spread out their campfires in long lines to make the Quraysh believe that there were more of us than there were.

At the first charge the enemy was dumbfounded. Their horses were afraid to plunge into the trench, and when a few hotheads forced them to try and leap across, they fell short and tumbled to the bottom, writhing and whinnying in panic. After that, there was no second charge. For two weeks neither side moved. Ali killed one of their leaders in a duel. Otherwise, the casualties were one or two a day. Seeing this, the Prophet should have been encouraged, but he sat for hours in gloomy reflection.

I went to cheer him up, and myself. The whole future rested on his mood. “How can I be happy?” he said. “God has granted us everything, but He can’t change human nature, not in a week, and among sinners perhaps not ever.”

He suspected betrayals, and the longer the siege lasted, the more tempting it was for the hypocrites and unbelievers to turn against us. The nights grew colder; rain grayed the skies. I was sent underground, and a day later I returned with ominous news.

“They’ve found enough traitors to attack us from within. I crawled to within twenty yards of the tents where the bargaining is going on. Already the people know. Rumors are flying everywhere that our women and children will be kidnapped at night while the men are on the barricades.”

The Prophet listened as I unfolded my grim report. The key traitors were the Banu Qurayza, the last Jewish tribe in Medina to hold a peace pact with the Muslims. The others had all been banished.

The Prophet’s eyes looked troubled. “What is the enemy saying to make the Jews betray us?” He raised his hand. “Don’t tell me. The slightest word would be enough.”

He knew that the banished Jews had joined the enemy. A few of them came to the Qurayza and laid out the certainty that a vast army couldn’t be resisted forever. One enemy emissary, a powerful chief from Khaybar, where many Jews had fled to repair their fortunes, threw open the tent flap of the Qurayza chief.

“What do you see?” the emissary asked. “Nothing but our forces, mile after mile. Yet it will take the whim of just one man, Muhammad, to wipe you out, if his God orders him to. Doesn’t he already preach that Jews and Christians should abandon their faith and be converted?”

The emissary chose the right poison. The Qurayza wavered. What side did they want to be on when Medina fell? Up to that point, the pact with the Prophet had been honored on both sides. In return for remaining neutral, the remaining Jews in Medina had sent baskets and tools for digging the trenches.

By then the siege had become a battle of nerves. Every day the two sides stood close enough to hurl insults at each other, but far enough apart that arrows couldn’t reach them. Food shortages hurt both camps. The rain and cold eroded morale. In the tensest hour we got news that the Qurayza had torn up the treaty with us. They would open up the city’s southern flank, which they controlled, and once that happened, the

trench on the north would be useless. Worse than useless, since the men stationed there all day and night had grown exhausted.

I sat in council with the trusted couriers who brought this news to the Prophet. Quietly he gave two orders. "Tell no one that the Qurayza have turned, or there will be panic in the streets. Bring several hundred soldiers and their horses into the center of town, to defend the women and children from attack."

The situation was dire. Muhammad turned to the Ghatafan, a nomadic tribe who had recently ignited the wrath of the Muslims, first by joining the Quraysh and lending them a major contingent of fighters and arms, but also by their relentless greed. God told the Prophet that he must break the alliance of his enemies. Looking to the weakest link, he landed upon the Ghatafan, because they could be bought off. The Prophet offered them a third of the date harvest if they abandoned the war.

This was an excessive offer as far as Ali and the other fighters were concerned, but then the Ghatafan spat in our faces, demanding not a third but half the year's crop as their bribe. At that moment God spoke in a mystifying way. He told the Prophet to agree. This decision was greeted with stunned silence.

I was made deputy and ordered to take the agreement to the Ghatafan chiefs. It was a degrading mission, and my heart was heavy. Before I left, I went to the Prophet's tent to make sure that this was his will. He nodded silently. As I was leaving, though, he said in a mild voice, "Out of respect, show the agreement to the Muslim chiefs." It seemed like no more than a casual reminder.

I went to the stronghold in the center of town where the Muslim chiefs had gathered for safety. When I presented them with the parchment on which the agreement was inked, they flew into a rage and tore it up. The Prophet was shamed in many eyes, and defeat, it seemed, had gotten one day closer with the Ghatafan still against us.

When everyone had disbanded in great discouragement, the Prophet kept me behind. “Remember the anthill you stamped out in a rage?” he asked. “Do you still think you can kill them all?”

I hung my head.

“I am not shaming you, dear friend,” he murmured. “But do you also recall that I held a single ant on my fingertip?”

I nodded. “Did that mean something?”

The Prophet smiled. “Not then. But God has now brought me the key to victory, and it’s a single ant.”

As I stared in amazement, he explained. During the previous night, Nuaym, an elder of the Ghatafan tribe, had sneaked across enemy lines. He demanded to see the Prophet, but was turned away with insults. Nuaym persevered until eventually he came into the Prophet’s holy presence. The two met in secret, and when Nuaym departed, the Prophet was wreathed in smiles.

“God tests me with an army of ants, but then He sends me the only one who matters.”

Unknown to anyone, it turns out, Nuaym had become a Muslim convert. He could circulate freely among all the enemy factions and was trusted by them. He now began to sow discord as the Prophet secretly instructed him.

To the Qurayza, Nuaym said, “Before you switch sides to the Quraysh, consider this. If they lose this battle, they will march home and abandon you. Ask for some hostages among their chiefs in exchange for your cooperation. If you’ve picked the right side, all is well. If you haven’t, you can ransom the hostages to Muhammad for your own safe release.”

The Qurayza thanked him for his counsel and sent word to the Quraysh that they needed hostages before agreeing to anything. Nuaym was there when the demand arrived. To the Meccans he whispered, “Why do they want hostages from their protectors? It can only be to trade them to Muhammad the minute they are turned over.”

Both sides believed him, and the next time they met, it was with narrowed eyes and suspicious minds. The Quraysh refused to give hostages. The Qurayza refused to fight against the Muslims, falling back on neutrality as their best hope. God saw other, more hidden weaknesses among the enemy. Wherever Nuaym went, he found it easy to open old wounds and festering distrust. Never had one ant wreaked so much havoc.

The wind blew strong that night. Standing on the city walls, I could see the enemy's campfires winking out. Hosts of soldiers would sleep fitfully on the cold ground without a fire. *If God isn't doing this to them, who do they think is?* But I never expected to witness the sight that greeted us at dawn—an empty field where thousands had been camped the day before. It was as if the angel Gabriel had descended and swept the ground clean. The foe left behind their wounded horses and camels, whose pitiful groans were carried to us on the same wind that had blown the enemy back to Mecca.

I fell at the Prophet's feet. "It's a miracle!" I exclaimed.

But he shook his head. "Only a few, like Abu Sufyan, deeply hate us. The rest came for plunder. The weakest reed flattens before the wind."

Actually, the ones who truly needed a miracle were the Qurayza, who had no protection now against the wrath of the Muslim hordes that descended on them, crying traitor. The Jews retreated to their stronghold and held out bravely. After almost a month, when starvation threatened their existence, they held council. Three outcomes would end the siege. They could convert to Islam and renounce all ties to their Jewish God. As a second choice, they could murder their wives and children, giving themselves no reason to live, and launch a suicide attack on the Muslims. Finally, they could pretend to observe the Sabbath and turn the day into a surprise attack. None of these alternatives was acceptable, though, which left total surrender as the only possibility. The Qurayza straggled out to meet their fate.

The crowd was hungry for blood. What was the Prophet to do with the traitors? He chose a course no one expected. "Let there be a judge who has nothing to gain by his judgment." The man he chose was Sa'd ibn Mua'dh, who was no more than a well-respected trader. But when the name was announced, the mob gasped and drew back as he was dragged into the public square on a litter wrapped in bloody sheets. Sa'd had fought at the trench and received a wound from which he was slowly dying. On all sides it was agreed that such a man had no stake in any judgment. The Jewish captives took heart, because Sa'd was their former ally. Law and custom bound him to them, even if they had done ill to anyone else.

The Prophet withdrew, declaring that the judge's rendering would be final. The Qurayza pleaded for leniency, offering all their worldly goods and their women and children as slaves if their lives could be spared. Other allies kneeled before Sa'd and joined in the cries for mercy. For all the anxiety and panic they had caused, the Qurayza had never formally joined the enemy.

Sa'd listened as his bandages oozed. He was gray and weak. In a croaking voice he spoke his decision, and I ran to deliver it to the Prophet.

"Death to all the men. Slavery for the women and children." It was the harshest possible sentence. The Prophet made no comment except to order that the executioners should come from every tribe in Medina. This would assure that no single one would take the blame and all would share the guilt. Over four hundred Jews were bound and lost their heads. The Prophet received no revelation about sparing them or killing them, either way. He became stoic and grim. After the tension of the siege, he seemed to retreat into himself even more, and what time he spent in company was almost always with his wives, especially Aisha, the youngest, who had risen in his favor.

Months later I took her aside. "What does he really think of the judgment?" I asked.

Aisha said nothing, but she must have run to the Prophet. The next day, when he saw me hanging back during prayers, he said, “Walk with me.”

I obeyed, keeping quiet. I have the stomach for any battle, but the blood of the Qurayza was another thing.

“Do you have a question?” the Prophet asked after we had reached a cool stand of trees in the woods.

I hesitated. “Do I have a right to question?”

“A good answer. Allah is to be feared. He is also to be loved. From one moment to the next, I cannot be sure which He wants. Do you understand?”

“I’m not sure.” I wasn’t sliding under the question. The Prophet was talking about doubt, and yet he taught that doubt would destroy us faster than any enemy.

He said, “God does not hand down the truth all at once. He hands it down the way a wildflower scatters its seed, sending it in all directions. Life brings a thousand situations, and there must be a truth for each one.” The Prophet glanced sideways at me. “Can you begin to understand?”

“I think so. For every moment there is a revelation. What is true one time isn’t always true the next.”

“Yes. But if peace is true today and war tomorrow, how are the faithful to live? The choice cannot be left up to each of us. We are weak and blind. We are corrupted by sin. What should we do?”

I thought of the tale I had heard. “We can run when God whistles.”

The Prophet gave the first smile I had seen in a month. “You may abhor his judgment, but Sa’d gave me hope.”

“By killing God’s enemies?”

“No. To one who loves this life, any death is a reason to mourn. Sa’d could have sided with his tribe. That was the easy way and the way every Arab has known forever. He didn’t. He

sided with his soul, for he told me afterward that he couldn't face his Creator if he allowed those who hate Allah to go free.

“Do you see the spark of hope? When a man can decide life or death not because he wants revenge, but because he has thoughts of God, human nature is changing. I thought that was impossible, or that it might take twenty generations. By the grace of Allah, we are seeing it in our lifetime.”

I listened. I understood. I accepted. In my heart, however, I thought only one human had really changed—him. The Prophet has become his revelations. He sees beyond life and death, and his mind cares only to be part of God's mind. As for the rest of us, we will stamp out anthills for a long time to come.

YASMIN, THE WOMAN AT THE WELL

Only once since I was born have I been soaked to the skin. Black clouds moved toward Medina from the hills. Usually they disappoint. I see wisps of rain that stop in midair and never reach the earth. On that day, though, the day the promise was made, thunder cracked overhead like a blacksmith's hammer. It rained so hard that rivers ran down the street.

I would have hidden in a doorway until the storm passed, but something arose in me that I couldn't fight. I ran out into the downpour, stomping in the muddy water until it splashed up to my waist and stained my shift brown. The other women at the well looked at me as if I was crazy.

I was inspired, not crazy. You'll understand, if not now, then soon.

When the downpour ended, I dragged myself back to my little room. It has no windows, so I had to open the door to let in light. I stood in the doorway pulling off my dress, which was so heavy with water that I could hardly lift it over my head. A modest woman would never stand there naked, open to men's eyes. Modesty is a luxury I couldn't afford.

When you live on the streets you get devoured one way or another. I would be dead except for the shelter of that suffocating little room. It was added to the back of my brother's house.

When my brother came to the well and took me by the hand, I was amazed. You see, he had been content to let me starve. And then suddenly and without a word he led me to his house.

“You can’t come in. My wife won’t have a woman like you inside. Your place is in the back.”

I gave him a baffled look, and he said, “Don’t ask me why. It’s a gift from Allah.”

I’m grateful. I don’t ask why Allah couldn’t have added a window. But with certain men, as they grope and grab, darkness is a blessing. One day a different sort came to the back.

This man was young and nervous. From his accent I could tell he was a Bedouin, just in from the country. I told him to sit on the bed; I knelt and began to remove his sandals.

“Don’t,” he mumbled.

Just then the last ray of sunlight peeked through a crack in the door, and I saw a tiny red glow, as if a spark had dropped from the sky and landed on his head. A second later the glow was gone.

When the young man didn’t move, I took his hand and placed it on my breast. He snatched it away. I asked him what the matter was. He hesitated, saying nothing, and I held my breath. He was nice-looking. His beard curled at the corners, which gave him a whimsical look, like a poet. I don’t lie down with many poets. I felt under the mattress for the dagger I keep there. Nice looks are no guarantee that he hadn’t come to rob me. Then his hand wandered back to my breast. He moaned softly, and I relaxed.

Nature would have taken its sweaty course, but I hadn’t pulled the door tight enough. There was a small crack to let in the sound of the call to evening prayer. The moment he heard it, the young man jumped to his feet with a startled cry. A Muslim, like my brother. He unrolled a small rug that he was carrying on his back and knelt to the floor.

Not that I could really see him in the dark. I heard him saying the words, in a soft mumble. “Praise be to Allah, the Lord of creation, the compassionate, the merciful.”

“So God is more important to you than love?” I asked, watching him from the bed.

“God is more important than life,” he said. I wondered if my mocking tone would make him hit me. Yet quite the opposite happened. He sat beside me and began to weep. I didn’t know what to do. Something about his tears touched me.

“Lie down,” I said soothingly. “We don’t have to do anything, but if you want, I can teach you about love.”

I felt his neck stiffen under my fingers. “Love? You’re just a common—” He caught himself and stopped.

“Perhaps not so common. You haven’t given me a chance.” I hadn’t eaten that day. It would be a shame to lose the few coins he’d pay.

The young man roughly pushed my hand away. He got up and went for the door. Instead of leaving, though, he stood there a moment, pulling at his ear. He thrust something tiny and sharp into my palm.

“Keep this. I will return one day for it, and then I will teach you about love.”

In a second he was gone. I opened my hand. How amazing. In the candlelight I saw a small perfect ruby. It was shaped like a teardrop and set into an earring. So that was the red spark that had shone in the dark. I could hardly sleep that night thinking about the curly-haired young man.

The next day I caught a glimpse of him. I wore the earring brazenly to the well. Its shine would attract the eyes of more men. But as it turned out, nobody had time for me. Soldiers were milling about the square. They were infantry mixed in tight with horses and camels. So tight that when I caught a glimpse of my young man, I couldn’t press my way to reach him. He turned his head away before our eyes met. I cried out, but the din was too great. Then some busybody got the other women to shout “Slut!” because they thought I was there to grab a holy warrior, a *mujahid*, for myself.

With a clatter of arms and followed by loud cries, the *mujahidin* marched off, and the square grew quiet. I stood apart, in the corner under a half-dead palm tree reserved for my kind. My finger went to my ear and I touched the ruby my soldier had given me. *My soldier?* He hadn't even touched me except over my shift. And yet I couldn't get him out of my head. His memory didn't comfort me. Every day got more lonely instead. I lay in the dark kissing the ruby as if he was there, and the last words I heard were, "When I return, I will teach you about love."

My passion grew like a coal fanned by the wind. I couldn't tell anyone. I made up my mind to ready myself before the army came home. They had marched far away to Syria. It would be days or weeks. God's reach is far, and he rewards any man who fights for him. My soldier would drop gold at my feet and then he would marry me. I know a whore's logic is worth less than the ridicule it takes to scorn it. In secret, I followed the reciters around the streets. They have taken up the Koran as their stock-in-trade. People listen hypnotized. They say that the best reciters make strong men weep and convert infidels on the spot.

As for me, I didn't weep for God. Not at first. I wept for my soldier; a strong trembling came over me when I thought of him. Even so, the calls to prayer no longer irritated me. They felt comforting, like a faraway voice calling to me. I knew what I had to do.

The day it poured down rain was the day I knew something must change. The rain was a sign and the joy I felt a path toward something yet to be uncovered. After I dried off, I reached under my bed for the small bag of silver coins I had saved up over many years. I bought myself a modest dress and veil. I locked my door against the men. The only course left was begging. I went to the well and looked the other women in the eye.

"I want to repent. Help me save my soul. Whatever dirty chore you want done, give it to me. It doesn't matter how menial or filthy."

They stared, those who would stoop to look at me. But one old woman heard something in my voice. She took pity and led me to her house. We scrubbed the floor on our knees together. Her stiff joints wouldn't let her do the work alone. After that, when she was certain that God wouldn't strike her dead for bringing impurity to her home, she asked me back. She had cousins, and after a while I cleaned latrines and picked nits out of children's hair. I became known for my willingness to do things only a slave would do. It helped when I entered a house and recognized one of the men. They were eager to hire me if I kept my mouth shut.

The old lady was named Halimah, and God must have sent her. Not only did she hire me, but she had been the wet nurse to Muhammad. Old age had brought her out of the desert, and she followed the Prophet to Medina.

"He saw his first angels when he was with me. Two of them, who reached into his heart, and he wasn't seven yet," she said.

After that, I became eager for more. I had glimpsed Muhammad in the streets. Everyone did. As he passed by, he was like a shadow. I never knew he talked to angels. His old nurse wasn't ready to reveal anything, not just yet.

"I still smell what you were, and it's too early to see what you might become," she said leaving me to my scrubbing.

Then one day Halimah offered to walk me back to my room. We said nothing on the way, until a rich man's house came into view. To one side stood a gazebo where the family took the cool evening air. Halimah stopped and gazed at it. A graceful white dome was held up by pillars carved from twisted wood to imitate vines.

"I've never had time to rest, and no one has ever invited me inside such a lovely place," the old lady said quietly.

"Are you jealous?" I asked.

"You mean, do I feel the way you do? No." She cocked her head in my direction. "The dome of heaven is held up by five

pillars. I own them. Here.” She touched her heart, but instead of explaining she rushed on. We parted at my corner. I suppose my little room also smelled too much of who I was.

News of the Syrian campaign reached Medina. The Muslim force had been savagely attacked without warning. Someone had warned the emperor’s deputy in Damascus, and the Byzantines were ready. There was a bloody skirmish. Many were lost. I heard all this in scraps as the wind carried the words from the well, where the women looked anxious and afraid. I was afraid too. It wasn’t just his presence that I longed for. There was something else, and I didn’t understand how to find it. I told Halimah that I was growing desperate. Then she surprised me.

“I already knew that. I felt your desperation before you did.”

“How?”

I looked up. She was standing over me, straightening out her creaky knees.

“The wage of sin is desperation,” she said. There was no sermon that followed. Instead she taught me to pray, my face to the floor, facing toward Mecca because God’s house was there. She gave me the same prayer I had heard my soldier mumble. “Praise be to Allah, the Lord of creation, the compassionate, the merciful.” I was glad for that.

Halimah warned me that I must pray at exactly the appointed hours of the day when the muezzin called, and then one last time before I went to bed. I nodded, wrung the last drops of water from my scrubbing rag, and started to leave.

Halimah shook her head. “You haven’t asked why we pray.”

I blushed. I couldn’t tell her that I was praying for a soldier whose name I didn’t even know.

“We pray out of gratitude to God. He has given us everything. Remember that, child.” She caught a look in my

eyes. “You don’t believe me. Because you think God hasn’t given you much.”

I didn’t dare speak or even nod. If she sent me away, I’d have no more work or bread.

“Let me tell you what you are,” she said.

My heart sank. “I thought that you, of all people, wouldn’t tell me.” I heard my voice shake.

Halimah took my hand. “Listen to me, my dear. You are not what you seem. You are God’s child. Fate has taken you far away from Him to show you what it is like to be lost. But it’s the will of God to bring you back, all the more to rejoice.”

Something inside me cracked. I trembled like a virgin stripped naked before a stranger. Halimah and I wept together, and that was the start. I learned what I must do to deserve God’s grace. I prayed, a reminder in thought and word that God is here. The world pulls us away; the voice of sin is never silent. But if we remember God throughout the day, our souls approach his glory.

I followed Halimah around and watched her. She wrapped up pieces of bread and thrust small coins into each one. These she gave to the street beggars. That’s how I learned to remember the poor, as the Koran tells us. It was autumn, and when Ramadan came, Halimah sat in her room for most of the day. I brought her a tray of food, but she barely touched it or the jug of water I put by her bed. She didn’t have to tell me that she was fasting, or that the Koran told her to, but I had to know why.

“For a month we remember who we are,” she said. “We are not this body that is nourished by food and water. We are made for God, and so it is right to repent of the flesh, and to abstain from the flesh’s craving.”

She smiled like a child. “Of course, there are cravings I gave up long ago. We won’t speak of that.”

Her simplicity moved me. Halimah trusted me. I was welcome in her house without suspicion or scorn. Nothing was

locked away from me. So it was an easy step to accept her trust in God.

As for my soldier, he never returned. The *mujahidin* marched home. The calamity of the Byzantine attack was written on their faces. They dragged the corpses of the fallen behind them, wrapped in white winding sheets. I couldn't look. If my soldier was one of them, it would be unbearable. Halimah noticed, of course, but she didn't say anything when she found me weeping in a corner.

One day when I came to scrub the floors, she surprised me with a table spread out for a guest.

“Why didn't you tell me I shouldn't come?” I asked.

“Why should I? You are the guest.”

I had never seen lamb and apricots in her larder before, and the fresh oil she dripped over the soft warm bread smelled like an orchard in spring.

“What's this for?” I asked. I couldn't imagine where she found the money, and suddenly a pang of worry struck me. Perhaps this was her leave-taking. Was the old woman ready to die?

Instead of answering me, Halimah said, “Which is better, to dream of a feast or to eat it?”

“To eat it,” I replied mechanically.

Halimah passed me a platter of shredded lamb steamed in spiced rice. “It's time you realized that.”

It took me time to understand her teaching. For that moment, I was just glad to be her guest. In the past hunger had been my constant companion during the month of Ramadan, which had just ended. Muslims led such quiet lives then that there were almost no calls for me. Halimah stopped eating long before I was full, but she was content to watch me. When I took my sleeve and wiped the last bit of lamb grease from my mouth, she smiled.

“Now the feast begins.”

Halimah looked amused at my puzzlement. “When the body has had enough, the mind still craves its own feast. So far, you have been satisfied with wishes. You dream of being as full here”—she touched her heart—“as you are here.” She moved her hand to her stomach. “But as you said, it’s better to eat a feast than to dream of one. Are you ready?”

“I don’t know.” Her words made me a little frightened.

She went on. “You are standing at the door for the first time. What lies ahead is dim. But the angel who came to the Prophet speaks to you. He speaks on the wind and among the stars. Who knows what the wind says? The space between the stars is silent. That is why we have the Koran. The angel’s message lives in the Book. Anyone can understand it.

“The world has unfolded according to God’s will. There have been many prophets and messengers. But men soon forget, and then God sends those who warn of danger. Men still turn their backs, and finally God sends the pure word of truth. When that happens, there is no excuse. This is the golden hour.”

She had memorized scraps of the Koran, and with a glowing face she murmured one now. “Call on Him with fear and longing in your heart, for the mercy of God is near to those who do good.”

A silence fell between us. “Fear?” I said. “Why must I call on God in fear?”

“Because your young soldier may be dead. I’m sure you have other fears. Who else will ease them for you?”

Halimah had never mentioned him before, and I had no idea how she knew. I pulled my veil over my face to spare her the stricken look that came over me. “Can God bring back the dead?” I whispered.

“If He wills it, yes. But that isn’t the point.” Halimah’s voice grew sharper, as if she was pulling me back to myself. “To be born is to suffer, and to sin. The Arabs take no notice of mercy. Life is harder here than anywhere else. There is no

better place to forget God than the desert. What is the point of suffering, but to endure?

“Then one day God put Gabriel, his most trusted angel, in a small boat. He placed the Koran in his hands, and the little boat set sail. It arrived at the shores of Arabia, and you know what the angel said? ‘This hard land has made hard hearts. I will find one man who will heed God’s word. I will stand by him every day, giving him drops of truth the way a mother gives a squalling babe drops of milk. In time, these hard hearts will melt.’”

I will never forget that day, nor the teaching that came with it. Halimah taught me that the angel is near, and wherever he goes, a feast is spread.

I became devout and stopped longing for my soldier. After a while others noticed the change. I was given a place at the well, and eventually some asked me my name.

“Yasmin,” I said.

I smile now as the black clouds roll in from the hills. The wisps of rain that hang from their bellies tell my story before I let mercy into my heart.

Even so, I do run with the other women to the gates whenever the *mujahidin* return. They go farther and farther these days. The world is ready to fall to its knees. It’s time. And I confess it—I search the face of each soldier.

Last month I lay in bed and the door opened. Hearing the hinges creak, I shut my eyes tight. Fate is a guest who can never be turned away.

A man’s face brushed my cheek before his hands touched me. I imagined I felt curls in his beard.

“I’ve come back for the ruby,” he whispered. “Didn’t I promise?”

My heart beat so fast I thought I would die. “You promised to teach me about love. But I already know.”

“There is always more to learn.”

I felt his hand plucking the ruby earring from my ear. He held it up, and although it was midnight, the stone began to glow like a spark from heaven. With a sudden plunge he brought the ruby down hard on my chest, and I felt it sink beneath the flesh. It sank as far as my heart. Amazingly, I could still see it. The red glow spread until every chamber of my heart was filled and grew still.

The hinges creaked again, and he was gone. Did I dream it? No one could ever make me believe that. I carry the jewel of redemption in my heart, and with every fiber of my being I know that my soldier had returned for me.

ABU SUFYAN, THE ENEMY

I call it canny politics. The superstitious call it magic. If you want, you can call it the hand of God. But before he suddenly died last year, Muhammad achieved total victory. He could no more be stopped by force than you can stop a sandstorm by holding up your fist.

Mecca had no choice but to surrender. I will tell you that part in a moment. Many said the Prophet was inviolate from harm. I half believed it myself. My whole body trembled when I was brought before him, like a captive ready for sentencing. Muhammad wasn't the picture of a conqueror. He was subdued. His eyes barely saw me. Where were they fixed—on another world, another revelation? Quietly he said, "I am home again. I bear no ill will. If you wish to join us, the past is the past."

"Wish" was a nice word, a gentle word. He could afford to be gentle with a thousand swords holding the streets of Mecca.

More than anything he had wanted Mecca. To an orphan boy it was still the center of the world. Without it, Muhammad's conquests would have been like a necklace without the priceless pearl. After ten years of strife, though, how could he conquer Mecca when the Quraysh had sworn blood revenge? He would do it God's way, the only way we couldn't fight against.

It took him three years and began with a dream. Muhammad saw himself with his head shaved, the way pilgrims look after they perform the Hajj in Mecca. When he told about his dream, his advisers were shocked. The Hajj belonged to the old religion before Islam. Everyone knows

that. How could their new God share the same rites as the old gods? For once Muhammad's followers resisted him. The young *jihadis* who had grown strong in battle were stubborn. Muhammad could not convince them to bend, but finally he let the people in the streets know about his vision.

A clamor arose to return to Mecca. The desire had been sleeping in the exiles' breasts all along. See what I mean about canny politics? A peaceful pilgrimage would bring the exiles home and at the same time reassure us in Mecca that our holy sites wouldn't go bankrupt. They were our lifeblood. After all, each turn around the Kaaba by the pilgrims was like an ox drawing water from a well. We needed it to survive.

And so the Muslims came, wrapped in the white linen skirt and shawl of the devout, dragging hundreds of sacrificial animals and keeping their weapons out of sight. I paid for a band of cavalry led by our best fighter, Khalid, to intercept them. Unfortunately, they completely lost Muhammad's train, which had purposely veered off onto a different, rockier route.

Sitting in council, half the Qurayshi elders wanted to concede. "Let them enter and worship. The Kaaba will still be ours. Doesn't that signal that we have won?"

I stood up trying not to ridicule such feeble logic. "If you let them into Mecca, you are saying that Muhammad is your equal, each one of you. In place of the tribe, which has held us together from the time of Abraham, an upstart will unite the Arabs according to his revelations. Trust me, the first revelation will be to destroy the idols."

Enough elders were persuaded by me that Muhammad had to stop outside the city. When forcibly stopped, he reached out to negotiate. No matter how different Islam is from the faith of our fathers, one thing is agreed upon. The sacred precincts of Mecca cannot be a place for violence. Pilgrims cannot fight holy wars. Holy grace depends upon it.

When his emissaries sued for peace, I didn't relent easily. I forced the chiefs to demand that the Muslims go away for one year before attempting to worship in the city. In return, we

would halt hostilities against them for ten years. I know the concession was too great. I was admitting military defeat. But the soldiers of Mecca—every citizen, in fact—believed that the Muslims fought with special magic to protect them. When that kind of belief takes hold, the enemy has won before the first blow has been struck.

After signing the treaty where he was camped, on the plain of Hudaibiyah, Muhammad's camp buzzed with resentment. They had marched four days to visit the Holy House and make sacrifice. Why should they turn back when they were in sight of the city walls?

Umar, one of the angriest, stood up and challenged Muhammad to his face. "Are you not the prophet of God? Isn't our cause right and the Quraysh's wrong? Haven't you promised us that we would make seven circles around the Kaaba?"

Meekly Muhammad nodded yes to each question, but when Umar got to the last, he replied, "I promised you worship at the Kaaba, but did I say it would be this year?"

A tricky answer, but Umar sat down, and there was no rebellion. Still, Muhammad needed a revelation. And one came. God told him that certain victory (Al-Fath) had been won. Therefore, Muhammad ordered that the sacrificial animals be sacrificed outside the city walls. He strode outside and made the first sacrifice of a prize camel. Some of his followers grumbled, but when he appeared before them to have his head shaved, as a sign that the holy rites had been successful, they complied. Their shorn hair was carried by the wind to the gates of Mecca. It slipped under and littered the holy sites themselves. The Prophet knew what he was about.

As I feared, the treaty was thin. A few night raids on one side, a few murders on the other. Arabs suckle on strife, and they are never weaned. What the desert makes us suffer, we make our enemies suffer. But I had lost the will to fight back. I became a negotiator hoping to extract a few bits of privilege, a little more breathing room before the final blow came.

We had turned the Muslims away the first time they came to worship, but the second time, a year later, couldn't be finessed. I sent word that Muhammad and his followers could enter Mecca, but only after all the Quraysh had abandoned the city. We would sit up in the hills for three days and wait out their visit. This was offered as a gesture of peace, to ensure that the pilgrims wouldn't run into violence. Muhammad knew that it was a mark of disdain as well.

Muhammad entered the gates of an abandoned city and drew within sight of the Kaaba. Walking up to it, he silently touched the Black Stone with his staff and gave thanks to Allah. The company of worshipers was deeply moved, thinking how many years it had been since he could do that. When Muhammad approached the door, however, it was locked. My doing, I'll admit it. I was damned if he would defile the inner sanctum. His followers grew enraged. I imagine they would have torn the city apart. Looking down from the hilltop, I half expected to see Mecca engulfed in smoke. Remaining calm, Muhammad ordered Bilal, a former slave, to climb to the roof of the Holy House and call the faithful to their noon prayers. When Mecca heard a Muslim singing out over the rooftops, the followers were satisfied.

My disdain was pointless, anyway. The new faith spread like a fever into every household. You couldn't see it, yet it overcame you even as you breathed. My own daughter, Ramlah, was lost to me. I renounced her when she ran off with a Muslim on the Hijra. One day soon after that I found my wife weeping.

“What is it?” I asked.

“There is no more Ramlah. She is now Umm Abibah.”

I shook my head. “Her husband died. He was a dolt and a traitor. And now she has a right to be a wife again.”

“You think so? Well you have your wish. She is now the wife of Muhammad.”

All the blood drained from my face, and I staggered to a chair. For the rest of the day and all that night I remained there, as if paralyzed. Nursing my grievances, my mind drifted back in time when I could walk past Muhammad in the street and not bestow a glance. But I'm a realist. The thin treaty turned worthless. I was sent to Medina in the hopes of fooling Muhammad into signing it again. No one was fooled. All the power was on his side now.

Maybe I was lonely in Medina. Something caused me to make a mistake. I went to my daughter, in the rooms she kept near Muhammad. What good did I think would come of it? She was nervous and stiff, barely bending to the floor to greet me. I saw a chair and began to sit down.

"Oh no!" she said timidly, snatching off the blanket that covered it.

I kept my temper. "You would deny respect to your father? It's only a wool blanket, not embroidered silk from Cathay."

"But the Prophet sits on it," she stammered. I stared at her, then turned on my heels and left without a word.

It has been told that it took three years before Muhammad swallowed Mecca. In the end, the city fell without resistance. Before the Muslims marched in, they sent a declaration ahead of them. Any citizen who stayed in his house behind locked doors would be spared. So that's what we did. I cowered by lamplight as the horses of the Muslims clanged their iron hoofs on the cobblestones. I didn't trust these warriors for God completely. I ordered that the lamps be kept low, so that the invaders would think my house was empty. All I could see in the darkness was the glint of fear in my wife's eyes. I never asked what she saw in mine.

There was no avoiding my fate. I had to face him.

"I will convert," I said, offering no conditions. I licked my lips, preparing to kiss his sandals, but Muhammad stopped me with a small gesture.

“You only need to swear two things. The first is that there is no god but God.”

I repeated the words. If you have lived as long as I have, your allegiance is greasy. It shifts easily from one god to the next.

“And the second thing?” I asked.

“There is no God but God, and Muhammad is His prophet.”

The words fell simply from his lips. He didn't puff himself up like an emperor. I knew that his struggles had humbled him. He had an infant son, Ibrahim, born in Medina. Muhammad doted on the babe, but one day he caught a fever and died. Then he sent a band of his best warriors to Syria, but they were ambushed by mercenaries from Byzantium. His foster son, Zayd, was killed, and with him a cousin, Jafar. Both were precious to Muhammad. An ordinary man wouldn't love his God quite so dearly after that. Or trust him.

One of the companions standing behind Muhammad cleared his throat. “There is no God but God, and Muhammad is His prophet.”

I suppose he was coaxing me. If I didn't repeat the words, who knows what would come next? For all his mercy, I had fought Muhammad bitterly in one campaign after the next.

Holding my feelings in, I rose to my feet. “Give me time to think.”

I strode out of his tent without looking back. For all I knew, a dagger could have plunged into my skull.

Few here in Mecca remember old Muttalib, the Prophet's grandfather. If they do, it's because he used to dote on his grandson, bouncing him on his knee while we drank and argued at the inns around the Kaaba. But I remember something else.

I returned to Muhammad's tent the next day.

“You’ve made up your mind,” he said. “I won’t ask. You wouldn’t be here if you weren’t ready to submit.” He saw how I faintly cringed. “You aren’t submitting to me.”

I had wasted enough time. I knelt before Muhammad and proclaimed, “There is no God but God, and Muhammad is His prophet.”

Muhammad gave a faint nod, satisfied, and I rose to my feet.

I could have walked out, but instead I asked, “When is God’s love so intense that it feels like hate?”

“My grandfather, Muttalib, used to ask that question,” said Muhammad soberly.

“I know. I heard him. I was almost a man when you sat on his knee. But no matter. Your grandfather planted a seed. That’s undeniable. He worried about his soul while the rest of us were only worrying about money and women. You have the same strangeness about you. No wonder.”

Muhammad nodded. “And I still ask the same question. You aren’t my brother, not yet. Allah means nothing to you. I imagine you’re the one who tried to humiliate me at the Kaaba.”

“Perhaps.”

He died two years later, at the age of sixty-two. There was no great crisis, just a steady withering. He lost his strength the way a great tree loses sap. His last moments, they say, were spent with his head resting in the lap of his favorite wife, Aisha. The end was gentle; the faithful were certain that the Prophet would be waiting for them in Paradise, where the trees are greener than any in Arabia, the virgins more beautiful, the crystal rivers sparkling under the sun.

Even in death, Arabia is his. Syria and Egypt will fall soon. The emperor of Persia trembles when the Prophet’s emissaries appear before his throne. Muhammad was told by God to send letters to all the rulers of the earth, informing

them that they must heed the Lord's word and convert. Without hesitation he sent the letters. Imagine.

The Prophet died in Medina, and it was deemed best to bury him there, in the courtyard of the house where he had lived. I watched the funeral without rancor. Beside me was Abu Bakr. Tribe and trade once united us, before we became sworn enemies. Now he is calmly accepting of my conversion. We are tied by faith, and Abu Bakr makes that a cause for smiles. In the confusion after Muhammad's death, several companions had a claim to his leadership. Ali had been chosen years ago, but he was a boy then. Umar and Uthman led strong factions. I imagine their heads swam at the prospect of ruling the world that Allah had handed them. But in the end it was Abu Bakr whom the chiefs chose. They call him *caliph*, successor to the Prophet's authority in heaven and on earth. A good choice. Abu Bakr is loved by everyone. One of his most lovable qualities is his age. The old man won't sit on the throne for long. The young rivals still have hope.

I move among them freely, a prize convert and a harmless dog with its teeth pulled. My end is near. My wife is sick, soon to leave me. She is half blind already. She can't see me when I sit by the lamp and read the Koran. What would she do if she could see that? My eyes fall on words that God must have sent especially to old men:

Every soul will meet death.

You will find your true reward only on the Day of Resurrection.

This world is nothing but illusory pleasure.

I have known illusion and pleasure, and both to the fullest. Is that my real bond with the Prophet?

When I laid my wife in the earth, Aisha came to see me. She married so young, as a mere child, that she still looks beautiful. She entered my house looking stately, and for a moment her eyes and the pearls she wore around her neck made the dim room shuttered against the sun seem bright.

“You will meet her again in Paradise,” Aisha murmured, taking my hand. It trembled slightly in hers. I couldn’t tell if it was from grief or age. Both, no doubt.

“My wife didn’t convert,” I said. “Doesn’t that mean she is lost?”

“Love will draw her to you. That will be her way to God.”

It was a comforting lie, and I was glad to hear it. Aisha sat with me for a while. The sunlight that seeped through the shutters glanced off her necklace, turning it into glistening tears.

“I want you to believe something,” she said. She saw me stiffen. “I didn’t come to preach. This is a story, the one I hold closest to my heart. On a cool night in Mecca the Prophet was walking to his house when he suddenly was overcome with sleep. He lay down in a doorway near the Kaaba. The next thing he knew, the angel Gabriel appeared and sent his light into the Prophet’s chest. The intensity of the feeling sharpened every sense, and the Prophet realized that his heart was being purified for something wondrous. Gabriel pointed to the end of the street where a winged beast stood. It was white and shaped like a donkey, yet larger. Calling the creature Buraq, the angel bade the Prophet to mount it. The instant he did, he discovered that Buraq was a lightning steed. Each of its steps reached as far as the horizon. The Prophet was struck with awe and fear. In a matter of minutes they made a journey as far as the farthest mosque, which stood in Jerusalem. At that time there was no mosque there, but Gabriel assured the Prophet of their destination. Inside the mosque were many holy fathers and prophets who had come before. After praying with them, the Prophet was told to remount Buraq, for his night journey was only half begun.”

Aisha’s voice rose and fell in the dark. Her eyes sparkled in the near darkness. Among the Arabs, no one is more esteemed than a poet. I never knew of a woman poet, but she could have been one. I felt myself filled with the scent of roses.

“When the Prophet got back on Buraq, he looked to the horizon, where the next step would land them. Instead, with a clanging hoofbeat that printed the rock beneath its feet, the creature soared into the sky. The stars came as near as a bonfire in the Prophet’s courtyard. They passed through the crystal dome of the sky, higher and higher. How could this be? He was still alive, yet the Prophet was entering the seven heavens. Each was dazzling to the eyes and blissful to the heart. When they reached the seventh heaven, a tree blocked the way. This was the sacred tree that no angel could set foot beyond. And yet the Prophet was allowed to enter. He exchanged holy words with the great forebears of Islam, first Abraham, then Moses, and finally Jesus. The final gift was to be ushered into the presence of Allah. Before the Most Glorious the Prophet was reduced to awed silence. Allah spoke and gave him guidance for the faithful. Their first duty, said God, was to pray fifty times a day. The Prophet bowed in obedience and withdrew. When he was back among the elder prophets, Moses asked him what God had said. When he heard about the duty to pray fifty times a day, Moses shook his head. ‘That is impossible. Go back and ask for an easier way.’ The Prophet returned to Allah not once but several times, until his pleas were heard. God granted that the faithful should pray not fifty, but five times a day.”

In the dark Aisha heard me chuckle. She stopped telling me her tale.

“Don’t be angry,” I said. “You’ve brought me a smile. I always knew the Prophet was canny. He even talked God around to his way.”

I couldn’t see Aisha’s reaction, but she didn’t scold me. Maybe she smiled, too. But the story came to an abrupt end. The lightning steed brought Muhammad back to earth, and he woke up shivering in the night air where he had fallen asleep.

“Was it a dream?” I asked.

“Many thought so, even those among the companions. They were shaken. The Prophet had received revelations, but

he always insisted he was a man among men, not a miracle worker. One of them rushed to tell the story to my father, Abu Bakr.”

“Ah,” I said. In those days I shunned Abu Bakr and barely recalled that he was Aisha’s father. “And he believed?”

“Without hesitation. He said, ‘If Muhammad tells us that his journey wasn’t a dream, I have no choice but to believe him. Don’t I already accept that the angel comes to him?’ It was from my father that I heard the story.”

I felt Aisha’s hand press into mine again. “But you began by saying that you live this story,” I said.

“Every day. I take a journey to heaven, you see. That’s the treasure the Prophet gave us all. He opened the way so that we can follow him. We don’t need Buraq to reach God. Our steed is the soul.”

Forgive me, but I was overcome. It was too much. My wife was gone. My body would lie next to hers very soon. What was left to me but a journey to heaven, if that’s possible? I held Aisha’s hand with a tight grip. Tears ran down my cheeks and were caught in the deep wrinkles there.

“*Allahu Akbar*,” I whispered. “God is great.”

“*Allahu Akbar*,” she repeated and slipped from the room, leaving behind the glimmer of pearls and the faint scent of roses.

AFTERWORD

A WALK WITH MUHAMMAD

Few can read the life of Muhammad without feeling excited and disturbed at the same time. I think he must have had the same conflicting reactions himself. Islam was born in a cradle of turmoil, and the arrival of Allah, one God who vanquished hundreds of ancient Arabian gods, caused an upheaval. A single individual had to carry the burden of violence with the awe of revelation.

Muhammad didn't see himself like Jesus, called the Son of God, or like Buddha, a prince who achieved sublime, cosmic enlightenment. An Indian proverb holds that it only takes a spark to burn down the whole forest. Muhammad struck that spark.

If the Prophet's life were a fairy tale, he would march down from his mountain cave, spread his arms like a latter-day Moses, and tell the people what God wanted them to do. In real life, Muhammad reacted with fear and trembling. You and I would also fear madness if the angel Gabriel appeared in a flash of blinding light and told us that our mission was to redeem the sinful world.

God did not leave Muhammad alone. When a revelation was at hand, Muhammad went into a trance state that deprived him of his own will. His face became flushed; he sweated profusely. The messages he received were dire. The fate of the Arabs depended on him. Muhammad's divine task was to convince his people to renounce their ancestral idol worship and superstitious veneration of multiple gods. If they didn't, Allah had apocalyptic punishment in mind. No sinner would be forgiven. Only those who feared God and obeyed him to

the letter would be saved. As for the Prophet himself, his freedom of choice was steadily removed, until the only path left was the proverbial razor's edge: every word, act, and thought was surrendered to God.

A more fearful destiny is hard to imagine. Muhammad said, on various occasions and in various ways, "The best in life comes from Allah. The worst is my fault." He took that attitude, giving all the praise to God and taking all the blame on himself. Not that every moment was about life and death. God had a way of solving Muhammad's everyday problems. One of his favorite wives, Aisha, stopped at an oasis by herself one day. A dashing Muslim rider came by and offered to escort her on her journey. They were alone together for a night, and tongues began to wag. Eventually petty gossip turned into a major scandal. The Prophet prayed to Allah, and a revelation came. Aisha was innocent. Anyone who spoke out against her was to be whipped.

In the same vein, Muhammad had helpful revelations that his various wives should stop bickering among themselves. God told the women around him to obey their husband in all things. The Almighty sometimes mentioned the Prophet's enemies by name in the Koran and roundly condemned them. He offered hints about how to debate with critics and naysayers. When the Muslim exiles tried to reenter Mecca and were turned back, there was a revelation to tell them that their apparent defeat was really a victory.

Muhammad could count upon God's counsel to extricate him from almost any tight place. Scholars divide the revelations, amounting to thousands of separate messages, into two main parts. The ones that came in Mecca focus on theology; the messages that came in Medina, after the Hijra, or migration, of 622 CE, mostly center on managing the new faith and the newly faithful.

The Koran is about salvation and apocalypse—just as in Jesus's lifetime, the early converts to Islam believed that the end of the world was at hand. But the Koran is also about war, politics, infighting, treaties, jealousies, and the everyday

headaches of running the government in Medina, including the collection of taxes.

PRACTICAL REDEMPTION

All religions attempt to bring worshipers closer to God, but few are as explicit as the Koran. The famous “five pillars of Islam” prescribe the duties of the faithful:

The profession of faith, declaring that Allah is the one God and Muhammad his prophet.

Prayer, which takes place five times a day facing Mecca, the most sacred place on earth.

Charity, through the giving of alms to the poor.

Fasting during the month of Ramadan.

Pilgrimage, at least once in a lifetime, to Mecca.

Each of these duties is a reminder that earthly life exists for one purpose: to redeem fallen humanity. One can see a common thread in the five pillars: by prayer, professing one’s faith, or taking a month off to turn inward, the worshiper sets ordinary affairs aside, allowing space for God to enter. Redemption is turned into a practical matter of things to do, and you can look out your window to see how your neighbors are coming along, as they can with you. This became deeply important when the first Muslims had to defend themselves from persecution by drawing into a tight community of believers, the Ummah. The image of presenting a united front against a hostile world remains potent today.

The tight bonding of believers didn’t leave out theology. There are six core beliefs that would be agreed upon even by sects that otherwise divide along fierce lines like the Sunni and Shia. These beliefs are:

Belief in Allah as the only true God

Belief in the prophets sent by God as well as lesser messengers and warners

Belief in angels

Belief in the books sent by God: the Torah, the Gospels, and the Koran

Belief in judgment day and the resurrection of the dead

Belief in fate, whether good or bad

These beliefs overlap closely with those of both Judaism and Christianity. But no religion can escape the claim that it surmounts all others. This is also true with Islam, which sees itself as “confirming” the past, meaning that God updated his old message as written in the Torah and the New Testament. He sent a new prophet whose word was final; therefore Jews and Christians should pay attention and convert. This would show their true belief in the one God. Naturally, there was much resistance to this idea, and the result has been a long, sad history of religious conflict.

Allah wanted the updated message to be complete. As a result, Islam became more than a religion; it is a way of life so all-consuming that nothing has been left to chance. God has a commandment for everything. In case there are any gaps, thousands of *hadith* exist to guide the course of everybody’s daily affairs. A *hadith* is a story or incident in the Prophet’s life. It indicates how he reacted when somebody brought a problem to him or a lawsuit or a question about right and wrong. Aisha, the favored wife whom Muhammad married when she was a small child, long outlived him. She became the source of some two thousand *hadith*. These have the force of law, even today. So while Christians may muse over “What would Jesus do?” the parallel question has a literal answer for Muslims. There are few crises in life, major or minor, where the faithful don’t know exactly what Muhammad would do.

One should note that a great deal of Islamic doctrine evolved after the Prophet’s death, which came suddenly. Jesus’s disciples were also suddenly bereft after the crucifixion. Muhammad’s followers were disconcerted, but quickly began to assemble a complete, authorized Koran from all the existing suras. The compilation went through struggles

and arguments, needless to say, leaving enough disputes to occupy generations of scholars and interpreters.

THE PATH OF SUBMISSION

Because the Prophet's life was filled with God's instructions, almost by the minute, for today's Muslims the path to leading a good life leaves no room for doubt. The highest virtue in Islam is surrender or submission. Those of us standing outside the faith may have a difficult time understanding this virtue. We reject the absence of free choice. Most of us want to have it both ways, to obey God some of the time and make up our own minds the rest of the time. Islam, to be blunt, considers that the path to damnation. Why would anyone willingly set his or her own sinful desires against the precious word of God? Why would a person choose to live a single moment apart from the divine?

There's no getting around this vital difference, and it explains many things. For one, it explains the spread of Islam, which happened like wildfire within a few years of Muhammad's death. His companions, the handful who migrated to Medina with him, began life as merchants and traders in Mecca. But Ali, Umar, and Uthman ended their lives as caliphs, rulers of an empire that extended from Egypt to Persia. This vast expansion wasn't due to warfare, although the Muslims were fierce warriors. Instead, Islam offered closeness to God. Closeness to God is a human yearning that wants to be fulfilled. Islam didn't fulfill it in theory, but in everyday actions.

Ordinary people were used to praying to idols and offering sacrifices in return for rewards as basic as a good crop and a reliable water supply. Allah took over the functions of hundreds of idols, and in addition there was the promise of going to Paradise after death, dwelling forever in the Garden.

If the promise is delightful, the reverse is terrifying. Living according to your own whims, without regard for God's commands, leads to hellfire. That is why modernism has met with stubborn resistance in the Islamic world. Going on the

Internet, watching television, or attending a nightclub could imperil your soul. Orthodoxy is always that way, regardless of the faith. Muslims don't hold a patent on fearing the creeping infection of secularism. Fundamentalists in every faith hold the same suspicions. To them, the worldly has always been the enemy of the other-worldly.

If we look at Arabia before Muhammad, life was so harsh that it must have come as an immense relief to find a way that promised not just eternal life, but things far more basic: the end of blood feuds, a sense of belonging, the comfort of one faith for one people, and simple rules for getting along. The life dictated by the Koran wasn't a prison deprived of free will—it was order in place of chaos.

The tale of Muhammad and the five mares is central here. As recounted in the novel, Muhammad had a string of horses that he loved. It was his habit to take them out into the desert for a run. One day he took them out so far from Medina that the animals became desperately thirsty. Up ahead they smelled an oasis and began to gallop toward it. Muhammad let them reach almost to the water hole, and then he gave a sharp whistle for them to return. Most of the horses kept running, but five mares turned around and returned to the Prophet's hand. He used these five mares to breed the strain of Arabian horses that are most prized today.

The story is a parable about religious obedience, and when it's told, the moral is that God favors loyalty above all other virtues.

THE RETURN OF THE LOST

One has to remember that the Arabs of Muhammad's time felt like a people who had been left behind. The desert isolated them almost completely, making them safe from invasion, but also immune to religious influence. I was amazed to read that during Muhammad's childhood not a single Bible could have been found in the Arabian Peninsula. The dominant tribe in Mecca, the Quraysh, considered themselves the children of Abraham. And yet they also knew that Abraham's religion had

been lost; they inherited only scraps and dusty remains. That's why the myth of Zamzam, the well that God created to bring water to his children, was so crucial. When Zamzam was lost, so was the water of life. When it was found again, by the Qurayshi chieftain Muttalib, the water of life returned.

Muhammad was in the direct line of Muttalib, who was his grandfather. History writes itself from front to back, and once Islam thrived, writers were quick to revisit the Prophet's early life and fill it with portents and omens. They had Christ in mind as a rough model. We are given a lone mystical hermit who lays hands on the head of the boy Muhammad and predicts that he will be the prophet foretold by the Bible. In Medina another mystic, a Jewish rabbi, arrives to proclaim that the last prophet is at hand. In Mecca a handful of monotheists, known as *hanif*, instruct the young orphan in their ways, and the most outspoken of them, Waraqah, is bold enough to proclaim Muhammad as the chosen one at the very doors of the Kaaba.

If this is exciting, the disturbing parts aren't far behind. The Jews of Medina were the first to welcome Muhammad and his tiny band of followers into their midst. The young faith was quite fragile. No more than a dozen close followers, the companions, had developed over the twelve years since the first revelation. For the first three years Muhammad told no one about his calling outside his family. Under constant threats from the Quraysh, perhaps forty to a hundred converts emerged before the Hijra. It is remarkable that the Jews of Medina were willing to accept Muhammad as someone to judge their disputes and to draw up a plan for bringing peace to all the warring tribes in the city.

Yet in the next few years, as the faithful grew in numbers, God told Muhammad to drive the Jewish tribes out of Medina, exiling them to marginal wastelands. Later, when Jewish resentment flared up and the last remaining tribe cooperated with the invading army from Mecca, Muhammad exercised violent retribution. All the men were beheaded, and the women and children divided as the spoils of war, many to be

sold into slavery. This horrifying decision, because it came by revelation, has been praised by Islamic historians. Only in recent times have some revisionists considered it as the barbaric crime it is.

Here we meet the dark underside of the Prophet's mission. His every act and word has the force of God behind it (except perhaps only the "satanic verses" in the Koran, so called because they were inspired by demonic forces to delude and briefly mislead Muhammad—he soon saw through them and returned to Allah's guidance). I don't think Muhammad believed himself to be infallible. We have touching stories about his humility. He admitted his mistakes, and far from being the only one to give orders in times of crisis, he sat in council with his chieftains and listened to their voices.

After his death, the ranks closed around absolute truth, which meant that it was a test of faith to turn any act by the Prophet, even the beheading of his enemies, into something right and good. On this point, the critics of Muhammad cite his marriage to Aisha. She was the youngest daughter of Abu Bakr, the merchant who stood up among the first and most devout of the new Muslims. At the age of six Aisha was betrothed to a husband, until Muhammad had a revelation that she was meant for him. The prospective groom was persuaded to give her up. The marriage to Muhammad took place but wasn't consummated until Aisha was nine. Beyond Islam, this episode is more than distasteful. Within the faith, however, it is praised. None of Muhammad's other wives were virgins, and the rationale is that Aisha served as a kind of Virgin Mary, made all the more pure because she was so young. To the outside world, this is a prescription for blind fanaticism.

CLOSING THE GAP

The bald fact is that we cannot identify with customs that exist across such a yawning abyss. And as mentioned, every faith closes ranks around its own version of the absolute truth. Islamic extremism is no exception, and unfortunately the loud minority have poisoned our view.

The God who speaks in the Koran isn't simply an Old Testament God with revenge and punishment in mind, whimsically deciding who will be rewarded or destroyed. The Koran affirms Judaism and Christianity. The most significant mystical event in Muhammad's life was the night journey he took to Jerusalem on the back of a lightning steed. Muhammad worshiped there with his predecessors and then was lifted up to the seventh heaven, where he communed with Abraham, Moses, and Jesus before being ushered into the presence of Allah.

The purpose of the Koran, to borrow Jesus's words, was to fulfill the law, not to break it. It took warfare to spread the new faith, but just over the horizon was a Paradise in which one God welcomed all believers. We can say that Islam brought monotheism to replace polytheism—the Arabs got one God in place of many. But the message was more universal. Allah wasn't Yahweh dressed in a caftan. He was the One, an all-pervasive presence that upheld the cosmos.

Every Muslim loves the Prophet, but one special branch of Islam developed an intense, mystical love for Allah—the Sufis. Within their approach to God, we can glimpse the immense beauty and power of Muhammad's legacy. In my childhood, I was taken to visit Sufishrines, usually the graves of saints who were prayed to for miracles. There were all-night poetry readings and dancing, truly ecstatic events. For me, these Sufis, with their extreme courtesy to one another and the ever present reminder of God's love, stood for Islam—white domes against the sky, romantic tales of princes and princesses, and the hypnotic call of the muezzins from their minarets.

The sweetness of these images is real, even if history has added a bitter aftertaste. Sufis strove for unity with God, and their path to enlightenment was love. Devotion led to rapture, and rapture led to the Infinite. No romance of the soul is more extreme, as witnessed in this poem by Rumi, the greatest Sufimystic:

You miracle-seekers are always looking for signs,

You go to bed crying and wake up in tears.
You plead for what doesn't come
Until it darkens your days.
You sacrifice everything, even your mind,
You sit down in the fire, wanting to become ashes,
And when you meet with a sword,
You throw yourself on it.
Fall into the habit of such helpless mad things—
You will have your sign.

These lines aren't a flight of fancy—they describe what Sufis actually did to reach God. The beauty of union with the One was exquisite, but the seeker burned himself to ashes before reaching his Beloved.

If Muhammad opened the door to God, Sufis were the ones who flung themselves through it, blindly and crying out with passion. This ardent striving is the best interpretation of *jihad*, and the one I hope will prevail. It brings light out of darkness, as Rumi proclaimed:

In love that is new—there must you die.
Where the path begins on the other side.
Melt into the sky and break free
From the prison whose walls you must smash.
Greet the hue of day
Out of a fog of darkness.
Now is the time!

Muhammad's ultimate legacy was to make time for the timeless. The One has no limitations in time and space. No face or body can be assigned to Him, which is why Islam forbids portrayals of God. By comparison to Allah's transcendent reality, the world below is a trifling illusion. Thus the heart of Islam calls the faithful to look beyond illusion to

find reality. For the Sufis, fear of a punishing Father evolved into a love affair with the invisible One, whose essence is mercy, compassion, and the sacredness of all life.

Muhammad can be judged by the worst of his followers or the best. He can be blamed for planting the seeds of fanaticism and *jihad* or praised for bringing the word of God to a wasteland. In my walk with Muhammad I found that every preconception was unfair. What the Prophet bequeathed to the world is entangled with the best and worst in all of us.

I doubt that the angel Gabriel has an appointment to meet me in a flash of blinding light. But if he does, I'd expect to wrestle with revelation every day. God didn't make life easier for Muhammad. He made it far more difficult, and the wonder of his story is how he brought light out of darkness with all the fallibility of "a man among men." The message he brought wasn't pure; it never is. As long as our yearning for God exceeds our ability to live in holiness, the tangled mystery of the Prophet will be our own mystery too.

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